

Direct References to the Rapture by the Fathers

The first direct reference to the Rapture (as the Church escaping the Great Tribulation) is found in the early second century apocalyptic writing of the *Shepherd of Hermas*. In the fourth vision, chapter 1, he says, [emphasis added] “I saw another vision, brethren—a representation of the *tribulation that is to come*.” Then in chapter 2, he says, “lo! *a virgin* meets me, adorned as if she were proceeding from the bridal chamber” and “I knew from my former visions that *this was the Church*,” and then, “You have *escaped from great tribulation* on account of your faith, and because you did not doubt in the presence of such a beast. Go, therefore, and *tell the elect* of the Lord His mighty deeds, and say to them that this beast is a type of the *great tribulation that is coming*. If then ye prepare yourselves, and repent with all your heart, and turn to the Lord, *it will be possible for you to escape it*, if your heart be pure and spotless, and ye spend the rest of the days of your life in the serving the Lord blamelessly.”¹ Notice also, the statement that to escape the tribulation the Church must keep a “pure and spotless” heart. This is the same language used in 2 Peter 3:14, speaking of the Rapture of the Church.

The next reference is found in *The Teaching of the Twelve Apostles (The Didache)*, written in the mid-second century, and with the help of the footnotes paints a clear picture of the chronology of events of the End Times (Rapture, Antichrist, Tribulation, Second Coming). In chapter 16, verses 3-8, it says [emphasis added],

For in the *last days* false prophets and corrupters shall be multiplied, and the sheep shall be turned into wolves, and love shall be turned into hate; for when lawlessness increaseth, they shall hate and persecute and betray one another, and *then shall appear the world-deceiver as Son of God*, and shall do signs and wonders, and *the earth shall be delivered into his hands*, and he shall do iniquitous things which have never yet come to pass since the beginning. Then *shall the creation of men come into the fire of trial*, and many shall

¹*The Shepherd of Hermas* 4.1-2 (ANF 2:17-18).

be made to stumble and shall perish; *but they that endure in their faith shall be saved from under the curse itself. And then shall appear the signs of the truth; first the sign of an outspreading of heaven; then the sign of the sound of the trumpet; and the third, the resurrection of the dead; yet not of all, but 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.*²

Notice, the context is the Last Days and the quote starts out with the signs of the times, coinciding with Matthew 24, Mark 13, and Luke 21. Next, comes the appearance of the antichrist and the Tribulation. Then, there comes the exclusionary “but” they that endure in their faith shall be saved from under the curse itself. The footnote in the text after this statement says, “from under the curse itself; namely, that which has just been described.”³ This is a direct reference to the Church being saved from the Tribulation. After this is established and as an explanatory note of the specifics (similar to 1 Thessalonians 4:16-17), three “signs of the truth” are given: (1) the outspreading of heaven (of which the footnote says, “Professor Hall now prefers to render *ekpetaseos*, ‘outspreading,’ instead of ‘unrolling’ as in his version originally. Hitchcock and Brown, Schaff, and others, prefer, ‘opening;’ that is, the apparent opening in heaven through which the Lord will descend . . . Bryennios and Farrar refer it to *the flying forth of the saints to meet the Lord* [emphasis added]”);⁴ (2) the sound of the trumpet; and (3) the resurrection of the dead; “yet not all, but as it is said: The Lord shall come and all His saints with Him” (the footnote says, “Zech 14:5 . . . As here used, it seems to point to the first resurrection. Compare 1 Thess 4:15; 1 Cor 15:23; Rev 20:5. *Probably it is based upon the Pauline eschatology rather*

²*The Teaching of the Twelve Apostles* 16.3-8 (ANF 7:382).

³*The Teaching of the Twelve Apostles* 16, n. 14 (ANF 7:382).

⁴*The Teaching of the Twelve Apostles* 16, n. 16 (ANF 7:382).

than that of the Apocalypse [emphasis added]).⁵ And finally, “Then shall the world see the Lord coming upon the clouds of heaven” (Matt 24:30). Therefore, processing all this information from the text and the footnotes and from the order presented by the text, this citation appears to be a direct reference to the Rapture of the Church, as outlined by Paul in 1 Thessalonians 4; preceding the Antichrist and the Tribulation and then, the Second Coming of the Lord Jesus.

The next direct references to the Rapture are contained in Irenaeus’ (120-202), *Against Heresies*, Book 5; where he uses Enoch as an example of the Rapture of the just/Church, clearly states the Rapture occurs before the Tribulation and separates the Rapture from the Second Coming and resurrection of the just. Irenaeus was a disciple of Polycarp (who was a disciple of John the Apostle), was the first to detail prophetic events after the writing of the New Testament, and gave the Church the first system of premillennial interpretation.⁶ The first citation was previously mentioned in the “Uses of *Harpazo*” section and comes from chapter 5, section 1, “For Enoch, when he pleased God, was translated in the same body in which he did please Him, thus *pointing out by anticipation the translation of the just* [emphasis added].”⁷ Next, in chapter 29, at the end of section 1, “And therefore, when in the end the *Church shall be suddenly caught up from this*, it is said, ‘There shall be *tribulation such as has not been since the beginning, neither shall be*’ [emphasis added]. For this is the last contest of the righteous, in which, when they overcome, they are crowned with incorruption.”⁸ The *this* mentioned in the text, that the

⁵*The Teaching of the Twelve Apostles* 16, n. 17 (ANF 7:382).

⁶Ladd, *Crucial Questions About the Kingdom of God*, 25-26.

⁷Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 5.5.1 (ANF 1:530).

⁸Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 5.29.1 (ANF 1:558).

Church is caught up from, is clearly the *Tribulation*. Then, Irenaeus continues on in section 2 of chapter 29 and sections 1-3 of chapter 30 to talk about the Beast and Antichrist. And at the end of section 4 of chapter 30, he concludes with the Second Coming, “sending this man and those who follow him into the lake of fire; but bringing in for the righteous the times of the kingdom, that is the rest, the hallowed seventh day.”⁹ This chronological order of events is carefully and logically stated by Irenaeus to be: the Rapture, followed by the Antichrist and Tribulation, followed by the Second Coming. He then confirms this same chronological order by addressing the order of the various resurrections in chapter 31, section 2, followed by chapter 32, section 1. First, [emphasis added] “As our Master, therefore, did not at once depart, taking flight [to heaven], but awaited the time of His resurrection prescribed by the Father, which had been also shown forth through Jonas, and rising again after three days was *taken up [to heaven]*, so ought we also to *await the time of our resurrection* prescribed by God and foretold by the prophets, and so, *rising be taken up, as many as the Lord shall account worthy of this [privilege]*.”¹⁰ This relates the resurrection of those in Christ and Rapture of the Church (1 Thess 4:15-17) to Jesus’ ascension (Acts 1:1-11). Then, comes the first and second resurrections described by Matthew 25 and Revelation 20 that are specifically tied to the Second Coming of Jesus, “. . . they are both ignorant of God’s dispensations, and of the mystery of the resurrection of the just, and of the [earthly] kingdom which is the commencement of incorruption . . . that it behooves *the righteous first to receive the promise of the inheritance* which God promised to the fathers, and to reign in

⁹Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 5.30.4 (ANF 1:560).

¹⁰Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 5.31.2 (ANF 1:560-1).

it, when they rise again to behold God in this creation which is renovated, and that the *judgment should take place afterwards* [emphasis added].”¹¹

The final direct references to the Rapture of the Church are found in Victorinus’ (d. 303/304) *Commentary on the Apocalypse*. From the sixth chapter, verse 14, “. . . and the heaven withdrew as a scroll that is rolled up]. For the heaven to be rolled away, this is that the *Church shall be taken away* [emphasis added].”¹² And from the fifteenth chapter, verse 1, “. . . and I saw another great and wonderful sign, seven angels having the seven last plagues; for in them is completed the indignation of God.] For the *wrath of God* always strikes the obstinate people with seven plagues, that is, perfectly, as it is said in Leviticus; and these *shall be in the last time, when the Church shall have gone out of the midst* [emphasis added].”¹³

These citations, taken primarily from the first two centuries of the Church, are clear that the Rapture of the Church shall take place before the Tribulation and at a time separate from the Second Coming of the Lord, thus fulfilling criteria (1) and (2) from Bell’s list. And in one of the citations of Irenaeus, the resurrection of the just is addressed as being in two separate stages, fulfilling Bell’s criterion number (3) also. The indirect references or inferences of the Rapture contained in the writings will be explored next.

¹¹Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 5.32.1 (ANF 1:561).

¹²Victorinus, *Commentary on the Apocalypse* 6.14 (ANF 7:351).

¹³Victorinus, *Commentary on the Apocalypse* 15.1 (ANF 7:357).