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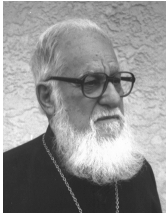
ORTHODOX EVANGELIST

“Do the work of an evangelist” - 2 Tim 4:5



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The Orthodox Church and Israel

by
the Rev. Archimandrite Fr. Eusebius Stephanou, Th.D.

Did you know that the Jews and Greeks have at least one thing in common: both have been God's problem children. It is all the stranger when you consider that both Jews and Greeks have been divinely favored.

The Jews received God's Law in a special covenant relationship in preparation for the coming of the Messiah. The Greeks were equipped with a language and philosophy best suited for expressing ultimate, metaphysical reality.

Many churches profess that God is through with the Jews. They hold that they have been cursed by God since their rejection of His Son, their true Messiah. They believe there is no place in His end-time plan for the Jews. They were rejected by God and condemned to be scattered among the nations, never again entitled to their historical Homeland and that God has no further use or plan for them. They have forfeited their ancient rights and covenant promises because of their disobedience and rebellion against God. Yet, can we say that God is finished with the Jews?

Those who believe that God is finished with the Jews usually hold that the Church is the “New Israel” and the church has replaced Israel and that all of the promises of God which were given to Israel are now inherited by the church. Those who

advance this opinion quote the scripture: “*The kingdom of God is taken from you and shall be given to a nation bringing forth the fruits thereof*” (Matt. 21:43). Yet, those who believe that Israel is still relevant to God quote St. Paul: “*God has not cast away His people which He foreknew*” (Rom. 11:2). We should remember that **God is a forgiving God** and at the very moment of the crucifixion of Jesus He said “Father, forgive them because they do not know what they are doing.” The Old Testament is also filled with scriptures of God's promises to Israel if they return to Him.

The Baffling fact of Jewish Survival

Doesn't it stagger the human mind when you consider the ethnic and racial survival of the Jews? **This fact alone indicates that God is not through with Israel as a nation.** They have defied the law of assimilation for at least 3,000 years. As a people, they seem to be indestructible. They have passed through massacre after massacre, yet they have survived. Not even

the unparalleled holocaust of 6 million Jews under Hitler could destroy their ethnic identity.

There is only one explanation: God's sovereign will. His plan for the Jewish people is just beginning to enter into a truly dramatic and final stage. God's Divine will shall be accomplished no matter what other peoples try to do to the Jewish race. “*Who has heard or seen of such things? Shall a nation be born in one day? Or shall a country be born at a single moment? Yet no sooner was Zion in labor than she delivered her children*” (Isaiah 66:8).

This is just what happened when Israel became a nation again in 1948 after 2000 years of being scattered throughout the entire world. This type of thing doesn't happen, in fact it has never happened before in recorded history! Even more of a miracle is just how the newly founded nation of Israel, which just a few years earlier its people were being exterminated in the concentration camps, **were now able to fend off overwhelming military forces.** The Israeli people were both outnumbered and outgunned not only in the first struggle in 1948-1949, but also during the six day war and Yom Kippur war.

During His dying moments on Calvary's Cross, Jesus asked nothing from His Father for Himself. He did not ask for mercy nor that He would intervene to deliver Him from those who nailed Him to the Cross. Jesus asked one favor from His Father. “**Forgive them for they know not what they do.**” His love for the house of Israel was not diminished as He hung nailed to the Cross. It was the same love that caused Him to heal the sick and afflicted, to cleanse the lepers

and raise the dead. His love is unconditional and His promises towards Israel are unailing.

It always grieves me in the spirit when on my many trips to Greece, I found apathy in the Church with regard to the rebirth of the Jewish nation. To think that it was only because of a Jew, Saul of Tarsus who was obedient to God's calling that the Greeks today are no longer worshipping stone idols, as their ancestors did. **If any people had a moral obligation to show gratitude and love for Israel it was the nation of Greece.** The Orthodox Greeks should have been an example to the rest of the Christian world of love for the Jews in a day when God is leading them back to their homeland.

They should have been the first ones to recognize the finger of God at work in this remarkable event. They should have led the Christian nations in proclaiming to the world: "Jesus is coming soon, because He is regathering His people and setting the stage for His second appearance!"

It should be obvious that the Holy Spirit is shedding more light in the Church in this last hour. It is impressive to attest to the love for Israel that the Lord infuses into the hearts of men and woman who are "born of God" and baptized in the Holy Spirit. **It has to be of God.** There is no other explanation. I cannot understand myself how I have come to a position where I can love the Jews as much as I do today. Only the Holy Spirit can account for that. The Holy Spirit alone can quicken that Psalm to my own spirit:

"Pray for the peace of Jerusalem, they shall prosper that love thee" (Psalms 122:6).

Will Heaven be on Earth?

It is a widely recognized fact in Orthodoxy that "Hellenism is a standing category of Christian existence," to use the words of the late world renowned Russian theologian Father George Florovsky. By "Hellenism" we here mean the classical heritage of ancient Greece. Some early pre-Nicene Church Fathers go as far as to call classical Hellenism "a tutor" that prepared the gentile Greek world to recognize Christ as the cosmic Logos.



While Judaism served as a "tutor" that offered Christ the Lamb of God as the fulfillment of man's religious need, Hellenism served to make Christ intellectually relevant. Offering Him as the ultimate answer to the age-long quest for the cosmic Logos, both immanent and transcendent.

In the process of developing a theology and philosophy of the Logos, however, the Church progressively detached herself from her Judaic roots. One significant result was the trend to allegorize and spiritualize certain texts in scripture that were intended to be taken literally. Platonism that viewed matter as the source of evil was the primary factor in this development.

A very conspicuous illustration

of this is evident in the writings of the Church Father St. Augustine (AD 354-426). Though he wrote in Latin, he was basically a Platonist. He made a permanent mark on the Church. East and West, with his allegorical interpretation of the Millennium doctrine (the thousand-year reign of Christ on earth) mentioned in the book of Revelation 20:2,6.

It was the teaching of St. Augustine that the one thousand year rule of Christ is not a future event, but rather a present reality that began with Pentecost, namely that Christ already reigns on earth through His Church. In other words, he understood the figure one thousand not to be taken literally, but just as a general extended time period. This is the official position of the Roman Catholic Church to this day and also that of many Orthodox theologians.

The inference logically inherent in this doctrine is that heaven will be totally celestial. It implies that Jesus is remaining on earth just long enough to execute judgment. When He finishes, He will depart planet earth and return to His place in glory and majesty where His chosen ones will be with Him eternally. He is finished with planet earth.

This Augustinian doctrine on the Millennial kingdom of God on earth flies in the face of the teaching of the early pre-Nicene Church Fathers who held to a literal interpretation of the one-thousand year reign of Christ on earth. For them the kingdom of God is an earthly kingdom. St. Irenaeus (AD 120-202), for example, speaks vividly about it.

"The earthly kingdom is the beginning of incorruption. It behooves the righteous first to receive the promise of the inheritance which God promised to the fathers to reign in it, when they rise again to behold God in His creation which is renovated. For it is just that in that very creation in

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which they toiled or were afflicted, being proved in every way of suffering, that in the creation in which they should be resurrected again, that in the creation in which they endured servitude in that they should reign” (Against Heresies 32).

St. Justin Martyr (AD 110-165) at an earlier time also teaches that Jesus will establish His Kingdom on earth: “I and others, who are right-minded Christians on all points, are assured that there will be a resurrection of the dead, and a thousand years in Jerusalem, which will then be built, adorned, and enlarged, as the prophets Ezekiel and Isaiah and others declare” (Dialogue with

Trypho 80).

Such Apostolic Fathers as St. Justin Martyr, St. Irenaeus and Papias viewed the coming kingdom in the background of the Old Testament prophecies. Jesus Christ as the Messiah is the ultimate fulfillment of the aspirations of the Jewish patriarchs and prophets and of the predictions found in the Psalms. The archangel Gabriel made clear to Mary at the Annunciation that the child she was to bear “shall be given the throne of his father David. And he shall reign over the house of Jacob forever and of his kingdom there shall be no end” (Luke 1:32f).

beginning, neither shall be.” St. Symeon the New Theologian said: “The coming of the Holy Spirit renews and restores a person both spiritually and physically, so that such a person seems to be clothed, not with a corruptible body but with one that is spiritual and immaterial and even now **ready for the rapture**” (Catechetical Discourses XIV, 2).

Apocalyptic writings greatly diminished after Christianity became the official religion of the Roman Empire. Things had been dramatically reversed. The very people who were once persecuted were now in power under Christian leadership! To many in the Church it looked as if the kingdom of heaven had come to earth. There was therefore no longer any need to preach about the “End Times” or a rapture. It was only when the Empire was under invasion or large scale natural disasters or plagues would occur that any end time writings would again resurface.

Lately, there have been some in the Orthodox Church that state that no Church Father had ever taught about the Rapture or a literal kingdom of heaven on earth. There are certainly many abuses which have come out of the Protestant denominations regarding eschatology, but that does not mean that we should avoid the subject. I am not claiming to teach any new doctrines on the matter, only to bring up the different views on it so people may be informed.

The same people that teach that the Bible cannot be interpreted without holy tradition, forget that during the first 300 years of the Church that the literal interpretation on an earthly reign of Christ was taught by many of the Apostolic Fathers. We cannot neglect this since it is a part of our history and traditions which were handed down from generation to generation. We should also understand that sometimes views can change when important historical events take place.

Should we Orthodox look forward to the Rapture?

By Joseph Abbate
President

Unfortunately limited space does not permit me to elaborate on this fascinating subject, but the question sometimes arises, **should we look forward to the rapture?** The scriptures mention the rapture of Enoch (Gen. 5:24), (Heb. 11:5), of St. Paul (2 Cor. 2:12) and of St. John (Rev. 4:1-2). Yet, the most famous passages from the Bible on this matter is 2nd Thessalonians 2:3. In fact, this scripture verse is read at every Orthodox funeral service.

There are indeed many views on the rapture, but the debate is not if the rapture will take place, but rather when. There are pre-tribulation, mid-tribulation and post-tribulation schools of thought. This is because certain pre-tribulation Christians believe that the rapture will take effect before the rise of the Antichrist to power and the following cups of wrath which God will pour upon the world as mentioned in the book of Revelations. The other Christians accept that the rapture will take place mid-way through or during the tribulation period.

The most common mistake taken by mostly the protestant Christians is that they believe that they will not see

persecutions, yet, **Christians are never guaranteed exemptions from persecutions.** In fact, we have witnessed more Christian persecutions in our day than in most of the other centuries combined. We Christians are assured that God's wrath does not come upon His children, but rather the “children of disobedience” (Col. 3:6). **There is a difference between God's wrath and persecutions** and the rapture should not be taken as an escape from persecutions.

As Christians, we should be “**comforted**” (1 Thess. 4:18) as St. Paul had said regarding the Rapture, **but ready and prepared to go through any tribulation which may come our way, knowing at the same time that our Lord Jesus Christ is always with us and will never leave our side.**

There are indeed some very prominent Church Fathers which mentioned the Rapture. The Apostolic Father St. Irenaeus in his work *Against Heresies* wrote: “When in the end the Church shall be suddenly **caught up** from this, it is said that there shall be tribulation such as has not been since the

Even after seven ecumenical councils it is amazing that Orthodox doctrine on both the Creation and the End Times are very vague. Other than the lines in our Creed that **God created the heavens and earth** and that **His kingdom will have no end**, there is nothing else mentioned about it. Our theology has not fully developed yet on the matter. There were even very prominent Church Fathers who differed on these subjects. St. John Chrysostom believed in a literal 6 day creation of the earth, while St. Basil the Great did not, but rather the days of creation were to be interpreted as **Eons**, or periods of time. St. Justin Martyr and St. Irenaeus taught the literal view of the earthly reign of Christ while St. Jerome and St. Augustine had not.

These matters in the Creed were kept basic for a reason. We know that God made the heavens and the earth, but we do not know if the days were 24 hour periods or thousands of years. We know that Christ will return, but we do not know when. Having questions on these things does not mean that one has a lack of faith.

We cannot absolutize what is relative, since our salvation does not hinge on whether the 6 days of creation were to be taken literally or allegorically and same remains regarding eschatology. This is unlike the belief in the Holy Trinity, the Divinity of Christ or the virgin birth of Christ. For these doctrines are crucial and vital to our Orthodox faith. This does not mean that we should believe new doctrines. We have an abundant amount of writings from our Church Fathers and history of the Church, yet, eschatology must often be taken in the context of Church history as well as World History. The belief in the subject of the Holy Trinity is eternal and unchanging. Eschatology is a belief in certain events which will take place in the future, a future in which Jesus said that *"no one knows the time when the Son of Man will return."* But He did give examples of what types of events would be taking place before

His return in glory as well as the fallen condition of the human race during the end times.

Those who teach that the Rapture cannot take place today because they claim that it will only take place after the tribulation period and the return of Christ also go against the grain of early Church teachings on eschatology. They even make a gross mistake that the teaching of a literal reign of Christ on earth had been condemned during the second ecumenical council, yet it is unfounded.

In our Creed we read the phrase that **"His kingdom will have no end"** and that some claim that is defined as meaning that a millennial reign cannot exist. Nowhere in history do any of the Church Fathers ever claim that Christ's reign will only last 1000 years, and after that period everything ends. Heaven continues, but the question is where? Does heaven come to earth, or does heaven remain where it is currently? The 1000 years refers to the "New Jerusalem" only which descends from heaven (Rev. 21: 2). Then after that the kingdom of Heaven continues. Remember the Lord's prayer "thy Kingdom come".

The argument that the clause in the Creed: **"His kingdom will have no end"** was initiated by a monk by the name of Nicodemus (1749-1809). St. Nicodemus the Hagiorite was the main figure in assembling the collection of Canons for the work "The Rudder" (Pedalion) as well as the Philokalia. It was his own private interpretation of the mentioned clause in our Creed in which he condemns a literal view regarding the millennial reign. It is clearly printed on the top of the page the word **"Interpretation"**, but nowhere in the actual creed is it ever interpreted as such by any Church Fathers which were at the Second Ecumenical Council, not to mention that over 1300 had past since the Council and St. Nicodemus' interpretation of the clause. St. Nicodemus claimed that the belief was condemned because of

the heretic Apollinaris' belief. Again, we cannot find any interpretation of any Church Father during the Second Council which states that. None of Apollinaris' writings exist since they were all destroyed, and he was condemned for his confusing the natures of Christ, not for his Millennial views. Even later Western Fathers such as St. Augustine and St. Jerome who taught the allegorized version on the Millennium had never claimed that it was condemned at the Second Council.

More importantly, we find the very clause **"His kingdom will have no end"** was not first added during the Second Council, but rather over three decades prior to it. It can actually be found first in the Creed of the Church of Jerusalem. It was added by St. Cyril the Bishop of Jerusalem (Lecture 15). It was specifically added then to **condemn gnostic sects** which claimed that after the 1000 years in Jerusalem that *"Heaven and Earth would pass away"* and even God would pass away. He even ends Lecture 15 with the scripture of second Thessalonians regarding the Rapture.

So, it was St. Cyril of Jerusalem which added the clause. Looking through the eyes of History we can witness that the view of a Millennial Reign had been replaced, just as the apocalyptic views of the Church had changed from before the Christianization of the Roman Empire. There is a big difference between changing views and doctrines being condemned. My goal was to demonstrate some of the views of the Church Fathers through the eyes of history, and I can in no way exhaust the subject with the limited space at hand. The Rapture should never be taken as a "cop-out" to escape difficult times, and I do not claim to teach any position with the issues at hand, but it is indeed important to know about the history, writings of the Church Fathers and views on the matter.