

THE ORIGIN AND NATURE OF THE DOCTRINE OF CHRIST'S PAROUSIA AS AN INVISIBLE PRESENCE

Carl Olof Jonsson

The subject of Christ's second coming has arrested the attention of Christians throughout the centuries, especially in times of international crises and upheavals. In our own critical time, when the future outlook for the human race seems darker than ever, interest in the subject is intense in many quarters. Such interest is nothing remarkable in view of the fact that many students of the Bible associate Christ's second coming with a world crisis of incomparable proportions, a "great tribulation, such as hath not been from the beginning of the world." (Matt. 24: 21; Dan. 12: 1 ASV) Many Christians feel that this "great tribulation" will overtake mankind very soon, perhaps even before the end of the present century. A question closely related to these expectations is: Will Christ's coming take place *before, during, or after* this "great tribulation"?

This question has been heatedly debated and has caused severe divisions among Evangelical Christians for over a century. There are many millions of Christians in the United States alone who believe that Christ's second coming will introduce his millennial reign.¹ These so-called premillenarians believe that Christ's coming will not only precede the millennium but also the "great tribulation" as well. Consequently, they are called "pretribulationists," and their conception of Christ's second coming is called the "pretribulation theory." This theory is, however, also called the "secret-rapture theory" or, sometimes and perhaps best, the "two-stage-coming concept." What, specifically, then, is meant by these different designations?

The basic idea behind the theory, regardless of its designation, is that Christ's second coming consists of two — or even more — stages, the *first* being a secret, invisible coming "to the air" when all Christian saints — those then alive together with the resurrected

¹ Dwight Wilson, *Armageddon Now!* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1977), p.

dead — will secretly be caught up to meet and remain with Christ in the air. This stage of the second coming, it is held, will fulfill the Apostle Paul's prophecy at I Thessalonians 4: 16, 17 ASV, which reads: "For the Lord himself shall descend from heaven, with a shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trump of God: and the dead in Christ shall rise first; then we that are alive, that are left, shall together with them be caught up in the clouds, to meet the Lord in the air: and so shall we ever be with the Lord." This coming for the saints is supposed to occur *before* the "great tribulation, whereby all true Christians, *the saints*, will escape that time of trouble. The *second* stage of Christ's coming is supposed to commence when he comes to earth with all his saints to execute judgment on the ungodly world of mankind as described at Jude 14 and 15 and to establish his millennial kingdom. Thus the first stage of Christ's coming is said to be a coming *for* his saints, while the second stage is held to be a coming *with* his saints.

In the original Greek text of the New Testament, several different words are used in the many references to Christ's second coming. Most of the defenders of the two-stage-coming doctrine hold that the Greek word *parousia* refers to the first stage. This word, which is usually translated "coming" may also be translated "presence." Hence, the first stage of Christ's coming, or *parousia*, is therefore often described as a period of the secret and invisible presence of the Lord Jesus "in the air." On the other hand, two other words *epiphaneia* or "appearing" and *apokalypsis* or "revelation" are usually applied to the second stage when Christ will "appear" and "reveal" himself to the world of mankind. However, not all proponents of the two-stage-coming theory agree on these applications of the terms in question.

As to the duration of the interval between the two stages of Christ's second coming or advent, the adherents of the two-stage-coming theory are not agreed among themselves either. Although the second stage is usually held to be separated from the first by a period of seven years, there are those who hold that it will be either a shorter or a longer time span.

Disagreement on this point seems to have been greater during the last century. James Grant, the editor of certain different religious

journals in London, described the variety of opinions on the matter in the 1860s in the following way: "As to the duration of the period ... those Millenarians who have embraced the notion are not agreed among themselves. Some suppose it will be a period of great length, even, it may be, extending over centuries; others that it will most probably be a term of much more brief duration: but, somehow or other, all of them seem to agree in the belief that years will intervene between this secret and silent taking up of the living saints to meet the Lord in the air, and their descending with him to the earth to reign in our world for a thousand years."²

A reader acquainted with the views of Jehovah's Witnesses will perhaps realize at this point that their conception of Christ's second coming is closely related to this "two-stage-coming" idea, being a variant of the notion of a longer interval between the two stages. The Witnesses now hold that the first stage - the beginning of Christ's *parousia* — started in 1914, while the last stage — his *apokalypsis* or revelation to execute judgment on the ungodly — is yet future.³

THE MACPHERSON THESIS OF THE ORIGIN OF THE TWO-STAGE COMING DOCTRINE

In recent years the issue of *the origin* of the "secret rapture" or "two-stage coming" idea has been heatedly debated. A number of books and articles on the subject have appeared. In particular, the works published by Dave MacPherson have greatly contributed to the renewed interest in the subject.⁴ All scholars seem to agree that

² James Grant, *The End of all Things; or, The Coming and Kingdom of Christ*, Second Edition (London, 1866), p. 316

³ The conception of the "rapture" has gone through a series of developments in past Watch Tower Society interpretations. Presently the Society holds that the "first resurrection" took place in 1918 and that "anointed Christians" among Jehovah's Witnesses who have died since that date have been "changed" immediately at the moment of death and united with Christ. It is also held that this process will continue on through the great tribulation and for a period after it. Thus the rapture is seen to be a very prolonged event.

⁴ See, in particular, Dave MacPherson, *The Incredible Cover-up* (Plainfield, N. J.: Logos International, 1975).

the "secret rapture" idea is a comparatively recent one, and most of them pinpoint the origin somewhere in the early 1830s when it appeared in the circles around Edward Irving in London, England, and John Nelson Darby in Plymouth, England. These circles were originally in close contact with each other, and both of them developed into new denominations: Irving's congregation into the *Catholic Apostolic Church* and Darby's movement into the *Plymouth Brethren*. The former came into existence in the years 1832-35 while the latter took their name in 1831 after Darby had settled in Plymouth.

One important reason why the origin of the "secret rapture" idea is discussed with such concern today is the accusation by its opponents that it originated in an ecstatic utterance of a "demon-inspired" woman. As is well known, Irving's Catholic Apostolic Church came into being as the result of the manifestations of what seemed to be supernatural utterances — speaking in tongues and prophesying — in Irving's church at Regeant Square, London, in 1831-1832. As the "secret rapture" idea seems to have been impressed on the minds of at least *some* of those bestowed with such "miraculous" powers,⁵ a number of the opponents of the idea later claimed that it had been brought forth as an "utterance" in Irving's church, indicating its supposed demonic origin.⁶

⁵ This was conceded by Robert Baxter, a lawyer from Doncaster who joined Irving's church in August 1831 but who left it in February 1832. He also stated that it was a delusion. See his *Narrative of Facts, Characterizing the Supernatural Manifestations in Members of Mr. Irving's Congregation, and Other Individuals, in England and Scotland, and Formerly in the Writer Himself* (London, 1833), pp. 17, 18.

⁶ Often quoted is S. P. Tregelles' statement on page 35 in *The Hope of Christ's Second Coming* which was published originally in London in 1864 and has been reprinted by the Sovereign Grace Advent Testimony (London, 1964). That statement reads: "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." Tregelles, who had been an early associate of J. N. Darby, later opposed his views, including the secret rapture theory. Tregelles also states on the same page from which he is quoted above that the secret rapture idea was brought forth about 1832.

MacPherson's contribution to the discussion is based on his claim that the "secret rapture" idea was originated by Miss Margaret Macdonald of Port Glasgow, Scotland, to whom it was revealed, he maintains, in a prophetic vision early in 1830. MacPherson was led to this conclusion through his study of the writings of Robert Norton, who was an early member of the Catholic Apostolic Church. The charismatic revival in Port Glasgow and other towns in western Scotland aroused much interest, and a delegation from Irving's church went up to Scotland to investigate reported charismatic manifestations. Many others, including John Nelson Darby, also travelled to Port Glasgow in the same year to investigate the alleged "outpouring of the Spirit." When, in 1831, similar "supernatural" phenomena began to appear in Irving's own church, they were soon accepted as genuine by his congregation, but Darby rejected the manifestations. Yet, MacPherson claims that both Irving and Darby got the "secret rapture" or "two-stage coming" concept from Margaret Macdonald and her revelations. The old assertion that the concept originated in an ecstatic utterance, then, is still generally held to be valid.⁷

Such an origin of the idea cannot, of course, be accepted by its supporters, and Darby's followers make the strong point that, although he was one of the most influential champions of "the two-stage coming," he had rejected the "supernatural" utterances. Thus, attempts have been made to prove that MacPherson and others who support his thesis are wrong. It is pointed out, for example, that it is very difficult to find anything close to a "secret rapture" or a "two-stage coming" in Margaret Macdonald's revelation.⁸ The only feature related to it seems to be an assertion that Christ's coming will be *invisible* to mankind in general. She states that the sign of the Son

⁷ MacPherson, pp. 36ff, 54, 62 (fnt. 21) and the Appendix on pp. 151-7 on Margaret Macdonald's own account of her revelation as reproduced by Robert Norton in his books *Memoirs of James & George Macdonald, of Port Glasgow* (London, 1840) and *The Restoration of Apostles and Prophets in the Catholic Apostolic Church* (London, 1861)

⁸ See, for example, the discussion by R. A. Huebner in *The Truth of the Pretribulation Rapture Recovered* (Millington, N. J. : Present Truth Publishers, 1970), pp. 65-72.

of man is just "the Lord himself descending from heaven with a shout," and that "only those who have the light of God within them will see the sign of His appearance."⁹ It is also asked, and reasonably so, that if Darby rejected Margaret Macdonald's revelations as a demonic delusion, why should he have adopted anything of the *content* of such revelations?¹⁰

R. A. Huebner quotes William Kelly, one of Darby's closest associates, to the effect that Darby himself arrived at the "secret rapture" idea in 1830 or 1831 when he was pondering over 2 Thessalonians 2: 1, 2 at the suggestion of an Irish ex-clergyman named Tweedy.¹¹

What, then, is the truth of the matter? Did the "two stage coming" doctrine come from an alleged prophetic utterance of Margaret Macdonald early in 1830, or was it discovered by Darby in 1831 through his studies of the Scriptures? A careful examination of documentary evidence indicates that neither Macdonald nor Darby were instrumental in originating it! Though the source of the theory has been the subject of much discussion and controversy for more than a century, nobody has hitherto been able to establish convincingly that it was originated prior to 1830. The present study, therefore, represents a breakthrough in this regard. While attempting to check the different claims with respect to the origin of the "two-stage coming" idea at the British Library in London in August 1980, I discovered new evidence that enabled me to trace the origin of the theory back to the 1820s, some years *prior* to John Nelson Darby's adoption of it and to Margaret Macdonald's revelations. The identification of the real originator of this theory will probably come as a surprise to those who are acquainted with the period in question. He was a very well-known figure at that time, though no one seems to have thought of him in connection with this matter.

⁹ R. Norton, *The Restoration of Apostles and Prophets*, pp. 15, 16

¹⁰ Huebner, pp. 57, 60

¹¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 44, 56, 57, 74

THE ALBURY PARK PROPHETIC CONFERENCES

The first decades of the nineteenth century saw a revival of prophetic study in Great Britain and on the European continent. This renewed interest in biblical prophecies had its background in the French Revolution which began in 1789, followed by a chaotic period of wars in Europe which lasted till 1815. Not surprisingly, these upheavals caused many serious Christians to believe that mankind was rapidly approaching the end of the world, and men of many persuasions started to investigate biblical prophecies. An increasing number of books, pamphlets and periodicals were published, prophetic and missionary societies were formed and prophetic conferences were held. The first and most important of these last were the Albury Park Prophetic Conferences, held about thirty miles southwest of London, England, during the years 1826-1830.

Two names above all are associated with the initiating of the Albury Park Conferences: Lewis Way and Henry Drummond.¹² These two had been in close contact with each other for some years prior to the conferences. Lewis Way (1772-1840), a barrister who was unexpectedly enriched by a bequest of £300,000 in 1804 purchased Stansted Park near Emsworth, Sussex, and settled there in 1805. Thereafter, he spent his time and money on philanthropic and Christian activity. In 1815 he became interested in the London Society for Promoting Christianity Amongst the Jews. Commonly referred to as the "Jews Society," it had been founded in 1808. Way dealt with the problems of the Society, reorganized it, and also took over its journal, *The Jewish Expositor*. Under the pen-name Basilicus, Way published a series of articles in that journal on Christ's second coming in the years 1820 to 1822. In them he expounded his premillennial views. These articles, as well as his earlier *Letters* on

¹² Most of the following information on Way and Drummond may be found in E. R. Sandeen, *The Roots of Fundamentalism* (Chicago and London: the University of Chicago Press, 1970), pp. 9-22 and R. A. Davenport, *Albury Apostles* (London: United Writers, 1970), pp. 15-28.

the same subject which were published in 1816, strongly influenced many students of the prophecies, including Henry Drummond.

Henry Drummond (1786-1860), a very wealthy London banker who had been a Member of Parliament from 1810 to 1813, declared in 1817 that he was "satiated with the empty frivolities of the fashionable world" and set off on a pilgrimage to the Holy Land. While stopping in Geneva, he met Robert Haldane, who had there initiated an evangelistic campaign against Arian tendencies in Protestantism. Drummond entered into that activity and carried on the campaign, first in Geneva and then in France. In 1819 he, together with Haldane, organized the Continental Society in Geneva which was formed to promote Protestant teaching in Roman Catholic countries and to proclaim Christ's impending judgement. Among the six vice-presidents of the Society was Lewis Way, with whom Drummond had become acquainted at that time. In the same year, 1819, Drummond purchased the Albury Park Mansion in Albury, Surrey, near Guildford, and settled there on his return to England. He also had a fine house in Belgrave Square, London, for occupation during his many visits to the British capital.

By the early 1820s Drummond and Way had become close friends. Both of them were prominently associated with the Continental Society, as well as with the Jews Society, and both of them were deeply involved in prophetic study. A third organization was formed for this last purpose in 1826 by Lewis Way, James H. Frere and Edward Irving. This was the Society for the Investigation of Prophecy, of which Drummond became a member and promoter. The Society was formed at the suggestion of Frere, a layman who was one of the most prominent British expositors of biblical prophecies in the early decades of the last century.

It was Lewis Way who first brought up the idea of a prophetic conference. "Infidel" liberalism prevailing in the organized churches had for some time been of deep concern to Way and his friends. Consequently, he considered the possibility of summoning such a conference. Drummond, in a booklet published for private circulation, briefly describes the background of the first prophetic conference:

... it was not till the year 1826, when Mr. Lewis Way informed me that the majority of what was called the Religious World disbelieved that the Jews were to be restored to their own land, and that the Lord Jesus Christ was to return and reign in person on this earth in the regeneration, that I had the remotest ideas of the mass of infidelity which lurked under the guise of what was called Evangelical Religion. When this was put to proof, however, at the public anniversaries of some of the societies, no doubt remained of the actual state of the faith of that portion of the church which took to itself the title of the Religious World: and some endeavor was made to counteract it. Mr. Way summoned a meeting of some friends in London, to consider what was to be done to recover the church out of its delusion; and finding London an inconvenient place for assembling many brethren for serious and quiet deliberation, it was resolved to invite them to Albury Park for that purpose. Here about thirty persons, of whom about half were laymen, and the majority of the remainder Clergymen of the Church of England, assembled in November 1826. All were invited who were known still to have preserved their faith in the above elements of the Jewish and Christian hope, without any distinction of sect or party; and these meetings were to continue for five consecutive years.¹³

In the subsequent list of participants, Drummond gives forty-four names which evidently include those present at one or more of the five conferences.¹⁴ To this number belonged practically all contemporary British millenarian scholars of note, such as William Cuninghame and James Hatley Frere, both well-known expositors of the prophecies; Edward Irving, a minister of the Church of Scotland who had settled in London in 1822 and whose eloquence drew large congregations; Joseph Wolff, the world's most noted missionary traveler of the time and, according to Irving, "the most learned eastern scholar present in the world"; Spencer Percival, son of the former prime minister; and the Rev. Hugh M'Neile, the rector of Albury, who presided at the conferences.

An enthusiastic report from the first conference in 1826 is given by Edward Irving in his introduction to Juan Josafat Ben-Ezra's

¹³ Henry Drummond, *Narrative of the Circumstances Which Led to the Setting Up of the Church of Christ at Albury* (London, 1834), p. 7

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 8

work, *The Coming of Messiah in Glory and Majesty*, published in London in 1827.¹⁵ Six full days were spent in searching the Scriptures. The discussion centered for the main part on four subjects: (1) the "times of the Gentiles," (2) the restoration of the Jews, (3) Christ's second advent, and (4) the prophetic time periods of Daniel and the Revelation. Similar subjects were discussed at the conferences held in the following three years. Summaries, of a sort, of the discussion were drafted by the host, Henry Drummond, whose secretary during the sessions had taken full notes. These summaries, *Dialogues on Prophecy*, were published in three volumes in 1827, 1828 and 1829.¹⁶ In 1829 the Albury group also began to issue a quarterly, *The Morning Watch*, which was financed by Drummond and edited by one of the participants, John Tudor. The purpose of this journal was to make the views and conclusions arrived at during the conferences known to the public.¹⁷ However, no report appeared for the last conference held in July 1830. It lasted for three days only, and according to Drummond, the interest was centered on the reports of the alleged outpouring of the gifts of the spirit which had occurred in Scotland earlier in the spring of that year.¹⁸

¹⁵ Juan Josef Ben-Ezra was the pen name of the Chilean Jesuit, Manuel de Lacunza. *The Coming of Messiah* was written originally in Spanish in 1791. Having been circulated for some years in manuscript form, it was published in 1812. Edward Irving read it in 1826 and was so impressed by it that he translated it into English, adding a lengthy introduction to it. As Lacunza strongly advocated the premillennial coming of Christ, his work awakened much interest among the participants of the Albury conferences.

¹⁶ The *Dialogues* are not verbatim reports of the discussions. They were written as discussions between the participants who were given fictitious names. Most of these pseudonyms, though, may be identified. "Aristo," for example, is Irving, "Crito" is Frere, "Sophron" is Cuninghame, "Basileus" is Lewis Way, "Isocrates" is M'Neile, and "Anastatius" is Drummond himself. Important sources for the identifications are two handwritten documents by one or two of the participants at the conferences. These may be found in a copy of the *Dialogues* at the British Library, London.

¹⁷ Publication of *The Morning Watch* had to be terminated in 1833 because of the editor's involvement in the formation of the Catholic Apostolic Church.

¹⁸ Drummond, "Narrative," pp. 11-13

As a result of these conferences a number of the participants, even some of those who failed to join Irving and Drummond's charismatic church, changed their conception of Christ's second coming; they began to embrace the two-stage coming view. For example, in 1828 William Cuninghame wrote a booklet on the second advent entitled *A Summary View of the Scriptural Argument for the Second and Glorious Advent of Messiah before the Millennium*, in which he argued on pages 11 and 12 that the three Greek words *apokalypsis* (revelation), *epiphaneia* (appearance) and *parousia* (coming or presence) all refer to one and the same event — Christ's second and personal coming. He does not divide this coming into two or three "stages." But just three years later Mr. Cuninghame had changed his mind, stating that his earlier view was a mistake.

I believe myself to have been mistaken in delaying our Lord's advent till the Day of the Treading of the Wine Press at Armageddon; whereas *I now believe that he comes long before that event*. The last error arose from my not distinguishing between the advent in the Air, where our Lord is met by his Saints, and his subsequent descent to the surface of this earth accompanied by all his Saints, *between which two stages of the advent I now think a considerable interval will elapse*.¹⁹ [Italics added]

As Cuninghame never accepted the outpouring of the gifts of the spirit in Port-Glasgow, Scotland, and later in Irving's congregation as genuine, it is unreasonable to suppose that he should have picked up his new view on the second coming from some "ecstatic utter-

¹⁹ William Cuninghame, Esq., *Strictures on Certain Leading Positions and Interpretations of the Rev. Irving's Lectures on The Apocalypse* (Glasgow, 1831), p. vi. The quotation is from the Preface which is dated as early as January 22, 1831. Further, Cuninghame states that the tract was written "at distant intervals, during incessant labours of various kinds," thus indicating that it was written during the previous year, 1830. Other expositors who adopted the "two-stage-coming view" during this period were the Rev. T. W. Cole, Edward Irving, John Tudor, and the Rev. John Hooper. Compare Hooper's tract, *The Doctrine of the Second Advent* (London, 1829), p. 31 with his booklet, *The Present Crisis, Considered in Relation to the Blessed Hope of the Glorious Appearing of the Great God, Even Our Saviour Jesus Christ* (London, 1831), pp. 15, 16, 33.

ance.” So where did he get the idea? Could it be that it emerged during the Albury Park conferences? A closer look at Drummond’s reports, *Dialogues on Prophecy*, gives the answer.

THE ORIGINATOR IDENTIFIED

As was pointed out earlier, the subject of Christ’s second advent had a prominent place in the discussions at Albury Park. During the very first conference in 1825 the expression “the day of the Lord” was examined. “Anastasius,” that is, Drummond, argued that this “day” cannot possibly mean a period of twenty-four hours, as it refers to “the whole period of Christ’s reign upon earth.”²⁰ Further, he felt this “day” of Christ’s coming should not be understood as one event only: “We must bear in mind that the things spoken of as belonging to the day of Christ’s coming, may be a *series of acts*, rather than one great and indivisible operation.”²¹ The first event of this “series of acts,” he concluded, is the resurrection of “the dead in Christ” and the gathering of these together with the living saints unto Christ. This will take place in the “morning” of the “Lord’s day,” “before any other act of judgement is pursued.”²² After that, Christ will turn to the Jewish people; “he invites them to call upon him in that ‘day of trouble’, promising to deliver them, and that they shall glorify him. He then turns to the ‘wicked’; and it is evident that it must be the professing Gentiles who are described by this term,” that is, apostate Christendom.²³

²⁰ Drummond, *Dialogues on Prophecy*, Vol. 1, 1827, pp. 158, 160

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 166

²² *Ibid.*, pp. 161, 176

²³ *Ibid.*, pp. 176, 177. Interestingly, this order of events is identical with that presented by Manuel de Lacunza in his book *The Coming of Messiah in Glory and Majesty*. Quoting Paul’s description of Christ’s coming at 1 Thessalonians 4: 16, 17, Lacunza states: “In a moment, in a twinkling of an eye, this first resurrection of the saints of the first order having taken place, the few worthy of that name who shall still be found on earth, for their uncorrupted faith and righteousness, shall be caught up along with the dead saints who are just raised, and shall ascend along with them ‘to meet the Lord in the air.’ ... Things being then in this state, and the Lord having nothing in the whole orb of the earth to contemplate, save

Although Drummond in this presentation of Christ's second coming does not describe the rapture as a *secret* gathering to an *invisible* Christ in the air, he does say that it will take place *before* the "day of trouble" upon the Jews, and *before* the judgements upon the rest of the world. And his division of the day of Christ's coming into "a series of acts" is scarcely different from saying that it consists of two or more "stages." What we have here, then, is clearly the *embryo* of the secret, pretribulation rapture theory or the "two-stage coming" idea.

During the second conference, in 1827, the idea of Christ's coming as "a series of acts" was discussed further. Again it was stressed that the Christian saints will escape the coming "day of trouble" or "tribulation" by being gathered to Christ in the air *before* Armageddon, understood as a period of judgements upon the ecclesiastical and political systems of the earth.²⁴ The Jews, who were thought to be restored during these judgements, would be delivered out of this great tribulation by the manifestations of Christ at the climax of Armageddon when he would destroy their enemies. It may be noted here that it was undoubtedly this insertion of the restoration of the Jews and their deliverance at the climax of Armageddon that originally gave rise to the idea of an interval of time between Christ's coming *for* his saints, and his appearing *with* his saints to wreck vengeance upon his enemies. Who, among the participants at the Albury Park conferences, elaborated these views further and suggested that the first stage of the coming, the rapture, would be a secret, invisible, event?

only a certain solitary woman [a reference to the 'woman' of Revelation 12 whom Lacunza had earlier identified as fleshly Israel or the Jews] who is deploring in the desert her past blindness and iniquities, and whom he shall save in that day, according to his promises (though for this end some great miracles will be necessary), there shall forthwith begin to be accomplished over this orb of the earth all those great and horrible things which are announced for that day. " (Vol. II, pp. 215, 216) Irving, who had translated Lacunza's work in the summer of 1826 might well have called Drummond's attention to Lacunza's views before or during the Albury Park conference in November of 1826.

²⁴ Drummond, *Dialogues on Prophecy*, Vol. II, 1828, pp. 47-61

In the Albury group periodical, *The Morning Watch*, the first article on the two-stage coming idea appeared in the issue of September 1830. The article, "On the Epiphany of our Lord Jesus Christ; and the Gathering of His Elect," was written by the Rev. T. W. Cole.²⁵ As a delegation from the Albury group had visited Port-Glasgow, Scotland, in the preceding month to investigate the alleged outpouring of the gifts of the spirit there, it has been argued that Cole's article was founded upon Margaret Macdonald's prophetic vision earlier in 1830. But Cole never refers to her vision, and his discussion has not much in common with its content. The next article on the subject appeared in the December 1831 issue and is entitled "The Hour of Christ's Appearance."²⁶ The author states that the rapture of the saints will precede any tribulation and judgement and that it will be an *invisible* event! Where did he get that idea? Not from a "prophetic utterance" of some kind, because, at the end of the article he refers his readers to a tract on the subject entitled *The Lord is at Hand*, which, as we will see, was written *prior* to Margaret Macdonald's visions. Yet it contains a clear presentation of the secret rapture and two-stage coming idea. The author of the tract must have been well known, as his name is not given: Who was he, and when did he write it?

Strange to say, no one seems to have thought of checking this reference to the tract *The Lord is at Hand*. It was written and published in 1828 by Henry Drummond, the "Anastasius" of the *Dialogues*, who had so much to say on Christ's coming as "a series of acts" during the Albury sessions.²⁷ In his tract Drummond reiterates his earlier view of Christ's coming but with some important features added:

²⁵ *The Morning Watch*, September 1830, pp. 587-93. The article is signed by "T. W. C.," which quite probably stands for the Rev. T. W. Cole, one of the participants at the Albury Park conferences.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, December 1831, pp. 251-54. As this article was not signed, it was evidently written by the editor, John Tudor. In the same issue, at pages 317-27, John Hooper also has an article on the subject, advocating a three-stage coming!

²⁷ The full title of the tract is *The Lord is at Hand; or The Last Trump* (London, 1828) According to the British Museum General Catalogue, Vol. 56, Henry Drummond was its author.

"The day of the Lord" consists of many parts, like every other day, and different acts are to be performed in different parts of it. The *morning* is that which is fixed for the resurrection, as Bishop Horsley has well shown on Psal. xxx. 3,5. The restoration of the Jews from all lands, and establishment in their own, is not an act that can take place in the twinkling of an eye, but must be gradual and progressive; the resurrection of the dead saints, and the changing of the living, is not a gradual and progressive, but a sudden and instantaneous act; consequently the latter must take place at some moment of the progress of the former

....

During the war, then, which succeeds the changing of the elect, the only witnesses for Jehovah which will be left on the earth, will be the Jews, and a promise is still to them that they shall be brought out of all trouble, and re-established in their own land: and that at the very moment of their greatest strait, the Lord shall manifest himself on their behalf. Thus the appearance of the Lord to raise his saints, and his manifestation again, in order to save his nation Israel, *seem to be distant from each other by all that period occupied by the war of Armageddon, during which time the Lord may be, though on earth, yet invisible to all but his risen saints.*²⁸ [Italics mine]

In this description of Christ's coming, we find all the main features of the secret, invisible rapture theory full developed: (1) the coming will be in two stages, the rapture and the manifestation, separated by a period of time; (2) the saints will escape the time of trouble and the coming judgements by being raptured *before these events*; ²⁹ and (3) this stage of Christ's coming will be *invisible* to the world, an *invisible presence* until the final manifestation.³⁰

²⁸ Drummond, *The Lord Is at Hand*, pp. 14-16

²⁹ The term "pre-tribulation rapture" that is commonly used today was not used during the period when the theory first became known and was circulated, although to Drummond and his associates the rapture was clearly pre-tribulational. To them the "Tribulation" on Christ's enemies and the "judgments" of Armageddon were the same thing.

³⁰ Drummond points to Christ's invisible presence during the forty days after his resurrection and says: "He may, in like manner, after his second advent, remain invisible to the world, and only be manifested at the great crisis of his ancient church (fleshly Israel). Drummond, *The Lord Is at Hand*.

Thus it is possible to follow Drummond's development of the two-stage coming and secret rapture idea from his first hints at it during the Albury Park conferences in 1826 and 1827 to this fully developed exposition of it in 1828. Another revised edition of *The Lord Is at Hand* appeared in 1829 or 1830 — the year is missing — in which Drummond adds some further arguments in support of his new idea. Paralleling Christ's first and second comings, on page 16 he argues:

Although it is common to speak of the first coming of Christ as a single, and insulated event, yet it was composed of many parts. There was his incarnation; birth; circumcision, flight into, and return from Egypt; his growth; his baptism; his ministry; his death; his resurrection; and his ascension. In like manner, the second coming of Christ must be composed of many parts: let it suffice for the present to remark two: firstly, his appearance in the air when he is come *down*, and his feet stand on Mount Olivet. An interval of time, be it a minute, a month, a year, or thousand years, must intervene between these two events.

Drummond's views on Christ's second coming frequently recur in his subsequent books and articles.³¹ Drummond's influence as an expositor of the prophecies is not generally appreciated. Yet during the Albury Park Conferences he was not only the host and the secretary during the sessions, but he also took a prominent share in the discussions. As may be gathered from the titles of his writings in the British Museum General Catalogue, he wrote or co-authored about ninety books and tracts, most of which dealt with biblical subjects. His role as the originator of the secret rapture idea, and the rapid adoption of this idea by a number of well-known expositors, may not appear too startling if seen against his background.

³¹ See, for example, the tract *The Second Coming of the Lord Jesus Christ* (London, 1829) and his article "Popular Introduction to the Study of the Apocalypse," published in *The Christian Observer* of March 1830, pp. 130-42. The idea is also hinted at in his address "Observations on Matthew XXIV," published in *Papers Read before the Society for the Investigation of Prophecy*, (London, 1828), pp. 23-36.

THE DISPERSION OF THE SECRET RAPTURE THEORY

Drummond's ideas were soon adopted by other members of the Albury group such as T. W. Cole, W. Cuninghame, J. Hooper, and J. Tudor. In fact, some of these even referred to Drummond in their earliest discussions of the idea. As already noted, John Tudor referred directly to Drummond's tract *The Lord Is at Hand*. And John Hooper, in his tract *The Present Crisis, Considered in Relation to the Blessed Hope of the Glorious Appearing of the Great God, even our Savior Jesus Christ* (London 1831) mentioned the "observations of Mr. Drummond on this subject, in a speech which that gentleman delivered at the Eleventh Anniversary of the Continental Society."³²

From the Albury group the secret rapture theory soon influenced John Nelson Darby and his associates. As was mentioned earlier, the Albury Park group and Darby and his fellows had close contacts with each other in the early nineteenth century. In the later part of 1831, Darby's Brethren movement was launched at Plymouth, and at one of the first services the Brethren had there one of their leaders, Captain P.F. Hall "gave a sermon on the theme of the Secret Rapture."³³ Significantly, Hall was then under the influence of Edward Irving. In the same year another series of prophetic conferences were begun at *Powerscourt House* in the county of Wicklow outside Dublin, Ireland. These conferences were held annually during the years 1831 through 1836 and were patterned after the Albury Park conferences. At the third conference in 1833 which seems to have been almost entirely dominated by the Plymouth Brethren, the secret rapture theory was brought into the discussions. Some of the leading Brethren, especially Benjamin Wills Newton of Plymouth, who broke with the movement in the 1840s, opposed the idea, but most of Darby's associates seem to have embraced it rather quickly.³⁴

³² p. 2

³³ Harold H. Rowdon, *The Origins of the Brethren* (London: Pickering and Inglis, Ltd., 1967), pp. 74, 78, 82

³⁴ Rowdon, pp. 96,97. Sandeen, pp. 36-8. Other prominent associates of Darby who rejected the secret rapture idea were George Muller of Bristol, founder of the

Although Irving and Drummond's Catholic Apostolic Church had some success in its initial years, its influence was small compared with that of Darby's movement. Many millenarians converted to the Plymouth Brethren, and many others adopted some of Darby's views, even if they did not join his movement. Thus it came about that it was primarily through Darby and his followers that the secret rapture idea was dispersed, despite the fact that it originated with Henry Drummond and was first embraced by his associates.

THE REVEREND ROBERT GOVETT

Many widely read expositors of the prophecies who joined neither the Irvingites nor the Brethren became champions of the secret rapture idea. Among them was the Rev. Christopher Bowen, incumbent of St. Mary's, Southwark who, noted for his Bible chronology,³⁵ advocated the idea in a tract published in 1849.³⁶ But the most prominent British champion of the secret rapture idea in the last century was, undoubtedly, the Rev. Robert Govett (1813-1901), a former Anglican clergyman who left the Church to be minister of an independent congregation in Norwich. Of this man James Grant states: "Probably no one has written more fully, or with more ability, in favour of the secret translation of the saints from the earth, while the world is, in all respects, except as to religion, to go on its wonted way, than the Rev. R. Govett."³⁷

Govett's most comprehensive discussion of the secret rapture theory is to be found in his 357 page book, *The Saints' Rapture to the Presence of the Lord Jesus*, which was published in London and Norwich in 1852. An important feature of the work is the stress he puts on the claim that the Greek word *parousia*, used twenty-four

"Open Brethren," and S. P. Tregelles. The Open Brethren, however, did accept the theory despite Muller's view.

³⁵ His chronology is known from E. B. Elliott's *Horae Apocalypticae* (4th ed.), Vol. 4, p. 236, from which the American Adventist, Nelson Barbour, got it.

³⁶ Rev. Christopher Bowen, *"Things to Come," Practically Inquired Into* (London, 1849)

³⁷ James Grant, p. 341.

times in the original text of the New Testament, does not mean “coming” but “presence.” He regards this translation as the very basis of the secret rapture theory. In his preface Govett says:

A friend who looked over the sheets as they came from the press, observed to me — “Your doctrine on the main subject of the book, appears to rest on your change of the word ‘coming’ for ‘presence.’” This remark is quite correct. So greatly are our ideas governed by our words, that I did not perceive the true Scripture doctrine of the return of the Lord Jesus till the real rendering was substituted for the ordinary

That the Greek word used [*parousia*] means “presence,” every Greek scholar will at once admit. It means the opposite of absence; the being alongside of certain other things supposed in the circumstances This sense will translate it everywhere. I add therefore, that the word (*parousia*) never signifies motion, though motion is frequently implied in the circumstances.³⁸

According to Govett, then, Christ’s “presence” or *parousia* begins when he descends from heaven into the air. Govett states directly: “The time of this tarrying in air, during which he is hidden from the world, and holding his court of inquiry into the deeds of his saints, is the time of his Presence.” And in a footnote on this assertion, he remarks: “It is for this reason necessary to translate *parousia*, ‘Presence,’ for by ‘coming,’ we understand motion, but the Presence properly begins when the motion from heaven has ceased.”³⁹ Accordingly, after this period of “invisible presence” in the air, Christ will descend with his saints to the earth to save Israel and judge the world. Govett’s view of the rapture is rather complicated, as he distinguished between three different raptures, two before the tribulation and one after it.⁴⁰ Such divisions of the rapture, arising from the difficulty in harmonizing certain Scriptures such as Matthew 24: 29, 31 with the secret rapture doctrine, frequently appeared in later presentations of the theory.

³⁸ Robert Govett, *The Saints Rapture to the Presence of the Lord Jesus* (London and Norwich, 1852) pp. iv, v

³⁹ *Ibid.*, P. 1

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 9-14, 269, 290-5

Govett advocated the secret rapture idea in several other writings, and in the 1860s he defended it strongly in a series of widely read articles in *The Rainbow*, a millenarian journal.

THE QUARTERLY JOURNAL OF PROPHECY AND THE RAINBOW

Discussions of the secret rapture or two-stage coming doctrine had a prominent place in some British millenarian journals. One of them was the *Quarterly Journal of Prophecy*, edited by Horatius Bonar, “the leading millenarian of the second generation,”⁴¹ who had left the Scottish Presbyterian church in 1843 and later became minister of Chalmers Memorial Church in Edinburgh. The *Quarterly Journal of Prophecy* was published from 1849 through 1873. It served as the leading British millenarian journal for nearly all that period. Although Bonar himself rejected the secret rapture doctrine and wrote articles against it,⁴² he granted its defenders space in his journal, also.⁴³

But the most heated battles on the secret rapture question were fought in *The Rainbow* magazine which was launched in London in 1864. Its editor was the Rev. Dr. William Leask, an Anglican, who edited *The Rainbow* for some twenty years and was also a minister of Maberly Chapel in London. For the last two years of its existence (1886-87), the *Rainbow* was edited by the well-known Bible translator, Joseph B. Rotherham.

The Rainbow is important for our discussion because of its influence on Charles T. Russell — the founder of the Watch Tower Society, the legally incorporated body through which Jehovah’s Witnesses are governed today — and his early contacts and associates. Those associates, George Storrs, George W. Stetson, Miles Grant, Joseph A. Seiss and Nelson Barbour, were all subscribers to

⁴¹ Sandeen, p. 25

⁴² *The Quarterly Journal of Prophecy*, Vol. 16, 1864, pp. 54-62. See also pp. 363-7 of the same volume.

⁴³ For example John R. Echlin in Vol. 21, pp. 405-11 (“Guiding Principles of Prophetic Interpretation”)

it, as Russell himself likely was, although that cannot definitely be established.⁴⁴ In any case, many of the ideas repeatedly advocated in *The Rainbow* later appeared in Russell's writings.

One of the most important issues debated in *The Rainbow* was the question of *The immortality of the human soul*. Leask, as well as a number of the regular contributors (especially William Maude and Henry Constable) denied the traditional immortal soul doctrine as well as that of *eternal torment* for the damned, strongly arguing that the human soul is mortal, and that immortality is possible only in Christ.⁴⁵ Other subjects repeatedly discussed in the *Rainbow* were *chronology*,⁴⁶ the *times of the Gentiles*, the biblical significance of the *Great Pyramid*,⁴⁷ Christ's *parousia* as an invisible presence, and many others.⁴⁸

From the very start, *The Rainbow* devoted a good deal of space to the whole matter of the invisible presence-secret rapture question, both in the "Correspondence" section and in the form of articles pro and con. Of the 570 pages of the first volume, for example, about ten percent were devoted to this matter. Most of the contributors,

⁴⁴ That Miles Grant, Stetson, and Storrs were regular readers of the *Rainbow* is evident from their contributions to the "Correspondence" section of the journal: Grant in 1870, pp. 95, 96; Stetson in 1873, p. 94; and Storrs in 1879, p. 92. Seiss contributed articles (e. g. In 1877, pp. 337-43), and Barbour's chronological interpretations were frequently mentioned favorably by a Mr. E. H. Tuckett (1877, pp. 376-81, 421-6; 1878, pp. 514-19) A review of Barbour's *Three Worlds* appeared in 1877 (p. 334), and in 1886 Rotherham published a lengthy review of Russell's *Plan of the Ages* (pp. 507-17). Storrs reprinted a number of articles from the *Rainbow* in his *Bible Examiner*.

⁴⁵ A controversy on this subject, which lasted for years, started with William Maude's article "Immortality," published in the March 1869 issue.

⁴⁶ Several contributors, for example F. W. Farrar (Nov. 1, 1865, pp. 491-8), pointed to 1872 as the end of the 6,000 years. So also did both Nelson Barbour and Charles Russell some years later.

⁴⁷ Tuckett and others stressed that the "inch-years" of the Great Pyramid pointed to 1874, 1878, and 1881 (1877, p. 426; 1878, p. 516) as did Charles Russell later in his discussions of the pyramid.

⁴⁸ This is not to say that Russell got all his ideas either directly or indirectly from *The Rainbow*; his belief, for example, in the mortality of the soul came from George Storrs who, in turn, got it from Henry Grew.

such as T. George Bell, William S. Ross Jr., E. H. Tuckett, Alfred S. Goodridge, the Rev. Richard Chester, John Avil, Joseph Seiss, and Robert Govett wrote in favour of the idea, while Charles Underhill, James Grant, Joseph Bryan, G. Greenwell, and William Maude rejected it completely or in part. Especially important are Govett's many articles, because his main arguments were later almost literally repeated by Charles Russell and his associates. As in his earlier writings, Govett stressed the thought that the Greek word *parousia* means "presence" not "coming": "Here let me observe how important is accurate translation, and how the most careful students of Scriptures may be misled, unless they refer to the inspired originals. Has not much of the mistake I am now combating arisen from the Greek word *parousia* being rendered 'coming'? I suppose all scholars will admit that it signifies the juxtaposition of two objects — 'the being present, presence,' as Liddell and Scott give it. The word in itself never signifies motion."⁴⁹

Only when *parousia* is translated "presence" instead of "coming," Govett argued, will one "at once understand how it may suppose many acts and a considerable period."⁵⁰ In his second article on the subject, Govett discussed Matthew 24. Translating the apostles' question at verse 3 as "What shall be the sign of thy *presence*?", he argued that the disciples asked not for the sign to *precede* or *accompany* Christ's coming, but for the sign to indicate that he had already arrived and was *invisibly present*: "This seems to me very decisive. The giving of the Presence shows that it is secret. *We need no signal to make known to us the presence of what we see.*"⁵¹ This argument frequently recurred in Govett's later articles. He pointed out how the changed meaning of the word *parousia* in this text also changed the understanding of the *manner* of Christ's second advent:

Let us now take the true rendering of the Scripture work most in question, and we shall see how a right use of it will untie this Gordian knot. If we say, "What

⁴⁹ R. Govett, "Will the Rapture Be Visible or Secret?", *The Rainbow*, June 1864, p. 260

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

⁵¹ *The Rainbow*, July 1864, p. 296

is the sign of Thy *coming*?" (Matt. xxiv. 3) then, on the opposite theory, we are enquiring for a sign of the Saviour's future movement from the highest heaven.

If we say, "What is the sign of thy *presence*?" we are enquiring for a proof of Jesus' *existence in secret in the air*, after his motion towards earth is for a while arrested.

The disciples inquire, "What shall be the sign of thy Presence?" (verse 3). This, then assures us that they imagined that Jesus would be present in secret. We need no sign of that which is openly exhibited.⁵²

These arguments had a major impact on Govett's readers. They were quickly picked up and repeated by others, both in *The Rainbow* and elsewhere. Today, they are fundamental to the doctrinal system of modern-day followers of Charles Russell, most of whom claim that Christ arrived in 1914 and has been invisibly present ever since. Are we to conclude, then, that Russell got his views on Christ's invisible presence and the secret rapture from Govett? This possibility cannot be discounted completely, especially as some of Russell's best arguments for the idea were formulated earlier by Govett. But there are indications that the credit for Russell's *original* adoption of the invisible presence-secret rapture doctrine should be given to another man, a millenarian of much greater repute and influence. Information on who he was will be published in a future article in *The Christian Quest*.

⁵² *The Rainbow*, June 1866, 265 and July 1866, p. 302