

# 1. Introduction

## Do We Believe in the Rapture?

An elder reporting at a consistory meeting about family visitation in the congregation once asked the question, “Do we believe in the Rapture?” He went on to explain that this question was posed during a home visit and that he was really at a loss for words. He simply wasn’t sure of the answer and so he brought the question to the consistory for resolution.

I noticed that most of the elders felt somewhat insecure and squeamish. It is not a common question. In Reformed thinking, the notion of “Rapture” is often left in so-called evangelical hands. Such people are better attuned to the more exotic elements in Scripture, and I say this to their credit.

Of course, everyone was eagerly looking at the chairman, who also happened to be the minister. Much to the surprise of many and perhaps to the dismay some, he answered immediately, “Of course we believe in the Rapture!” It is a very Biblical concept.

Perhaps we shy away from speaking about it because many others speak about it wrongly. Various ideas of millennialism are quickly tacked on to the teaching about the Rapture, rendering it suspect. In the confusing theological climate of today, you can be “pre-rap post mill” or “pre-mill post rap.” The question is: Does the Rapture come before or after the millennium?

A wrong view on the millennium also leads to a wrong view on the Rapture. And then everything is jumbled and utterly confusing. I therefore promised the brothers in that consistory room that I would devote some time to the Biblical notion of Rapture.

This promise led to a series of sermons on 1 and 2 Thessalonians.

This book, however, is not a commentary on the letters to the Thessalonians, although many passages in these letters will be examined.

Both letters deal extensively with the notion of the Rapture, and in them, the apostle Paul corrects many false teachings about this important event.

The Rapture is coming. This is a central teaching in Scripture. And I want to thank the elder who was courageous enough to ask that difficult question. This book is published so that we all may have a proper view on the Rapture and be ready for this monumental event when it happens, as it will one day.

## What is the Place of Israel in the Last Days?

The place of Israel in the last days is much debated. I do not wish to join that debate, but *something* must be said about the topic because it impacts the approach to the Rapture.

Some explainers believe that the people and state of Israel play a major role in the last days, or in the millennium. I do not want to minimize this place, but I do think that we need to keep our thoughts about Israel in a clear Biblical perspective.

Millennialists often view it as follows (with variations): The last days will see a restoration of the old theocratic kingdom of Israel, with Jerusalem or Zion in Palestine at its center. When Christ descends, he will, of course, go to the Holy City and conquer the world from there. According to millennialists, this is the time when *all Jews will repent and convert*. When Christ ascends again to heaven, the world will unite in an axis of evil and Jerusalem will be besieged by all nations. Christ will then return again to defeat the enemies once for all. This battle is often seen as *Armageddon* (see Rev 16:16).

The NIV notes that “many see no specific geographical reference in the designation (Armageddon) and take it to be a symbol of the final overthrow of evil by God.” Does the word *Armageddon* mean a place or a time? It is a rather unique term, probably a contraction and fusion of the Hebrew *Har-Megiddo*.

*Armageddon* may be a reference to the historic battle at the strategic location of Megiddo, where the Canaanite kings united and fought unsuccessfully against Israel (Judges 5:19). The defeat of the Canaanites at this place left the entire land open for conquest. The final battle in history will have the same outcome as the earlier battle at Megiddo. God will keep the way to the new heaven and earth open. I think that this is the purpose of the reference in Revelation 16.

The notion of Israel's restoration as God's people is based especially on Paul's assertion in the letter to the Romans, where we read, "...Israel has experienced a hardening in part until the full number of the Gentiles has come in. And so *all Israel* will be saved..." (Rom 11:25-26). The idea is that when the Gentile Christians have come to faith, the nation of Israel (all Jews) will then also accept Christ as Messiah.

There has been much controversy over the expression "all Israel." Who is meant by this expression? This is the key question when it comes to discussions with many millennialists.

In the traditional line of Reformed thinking, I take "all Israel" to mean the entire church of Christ, both from the Old and New Testament. The hardening of the Jewish nation in Christ's time and in subsequent years will not prevent the gathering of "all Israel."

"Israel" is understood here as the Jews and Gentiles who are justified by faith and not by the (works of the) law, who have accepted Christ as Savior and Lord. At one time, the Gentiles were excluded from "citizenship in Israel" but now they have been brought near through the blood of Christ (Eph 2:12-13). This is a key aspect in the Gospel, something that was not known in this way before but now has been fully revealed, and is therefore called a "mystery" (Col 1:26-27).

The Jerusalem of which the Bible speaks is the Jerusalem *above* (Gal 4:26). In Romans 9:6, Paul states that "not all who are descended from Israel are Israel." Being a true Israelite is not something determined by blood ancestry, but by the bond of faith. The line to Israel is spiritual, not physical.

We will always regard the people of Israel as God's covenant people of old, and our hearts should always go out to them. But in the line of God's redemptive plan, Israel has no special place today. From a Biblical angle, we do not need to connect the Rapture with the restoration of the people and state of Israel.

## The Controversy between Jews and Samaritans

Today it is not a matter of worshipping in a certain earthly place. There are no "holy" places, nor is there a specific holy land on earth. In John 4, we read how Jesus meets with a Samaritan woman at Jacob's well near Sychar. In this conversation, the woman says, "Sir... I can see that you are a prophet. Our fathers worshiped on this mountain, but you Jews claim that the place where we must worship is in Jerusalem" (John 4:19).

This summarizes the conflict between Jews and Samaritans. Jews did not consider Samaritans as belonging to the true people of God and so did not associate with them. Samaritans were descendents of the Jews who had returned from the great exile in Babylon and intermingled with the Jews and pagans left behind in Canaan. The Samaritan place of worship was in Samaria, not Jerusalem.

The conflict was sustained from both sides. When the Samaritans learned that Jesus was headed to Jerusalem, they would no longer accept him or show him hospitality (see Luke 9:51-55). The disciples felt that a proper response was to destroy them with fire from heaven. We can see here how easily religion is politicized.

At the same time, our Lord often showed that Samaritans were more virtuous and caring than many Jews. The parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37) and the Samaritan leper who came back to thank the Lord for his healing (Luke 17:11-19) are good examples of situations in which Samaritans showed more depth of understanding than Jews. The fact that Jesus associated with Samaritans, however, was a thorn in the side of the Jewish leaders and it may have aided them in coming to reject the Lord Jesus. There was simply no hope and place for Samaritans, according to the Jews.

From this angle, we can better understand that when the church at Jerusalem was scattered because of opposition and persecution, the Samaritans were the first who believed the Gospel (Acts 8). Again, those who were considered to be “last” were actually “first”.

All this simply underscores the fact that the Gospel is non-political and that God, in his grace, calls the *entire* world to salvation in Christ. From a biblical angle, there is no special place for the people and state of Israel today. It is therefore not biblical to draw a close connection between the Rapture of the church and the restoration of Israel.

Let us also note at this point that our worship is not in any way determined by place or edifice. We do not have to make any pilgrimage to a so-called holy place. In John 4, we read how the Samaritan woman raises the issue of where to worship. Our Lord Jesus answers her, “Believe me, woman, a time is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem” (John 4:21). Our Lord added, “Yet a time is coming and has now come when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth...” (John 4:23). Worship is first and foremost a spiritual matter, not bound to time or place.

## The Controversy between Jews and Arabs

Some see the age-old controversy between Jews and Samaritans as existing and continuing today in the ongoing battle between Jews and Arabs. Islam is the Arabic response to Judaism, it is said. Christians apparently also became involved in this conflict, especially since the time of the great Crusades.

While Christians await in the Rapture the return of the Lord Jesus Christ, Islam looks for the coming a final *Caliph* (Arabic *Khalifah*), a successor to Muhammad himself, who will govern the entire world. There is, however, in Islamic tradition not any notion of Rapture.

Islam does teach that all people will be resurrected, starting, of course, with Muhammad himself. All people will be judged. Salvation is not dependent

on the merits of Christ, but on one's own good deeds. The Muslim believers will go to experience the joys of heaven ("*Jannah*") while unbelievers will be consigned to the torments of hell ("*Jahannam*").

A Muslim will not see himself as a sinner in need of salvation. Therefore there is no desire for a Savior or Mediator. The notion of a cross where sin is atoned for is abhorrent to any Muslim. Salvation is earned by following the directives of the Qu'ran, and the final judgment is a matter of seeing which way the scales tip. In that sense Islam and Judaism are basically alike. The word *Islam* means surrender or submission. In both Islam and Judaism people are saved by their own faith and deeds. The word "grace" does not really play any role in both religions.

One of the difficulties in properly assessing and understanding exactly what Islam teaches on this point is that there are so many divergent traditions. The Qu'ran gives only general statements; tradition determines the rest. In Judaism, also, tradition plays a major role.

This is true, to a degree, also in the history of the Christian Church. Many things were established by tradition and not by revelation. Think, for example, of the different views between Rome and Reformation about the afterlife (e.g. purgatory). The church of Rome places tradition on equal footing with the Bible.

Also among Protestants there is much difference of opinion on points of eschatology ("the last things"). This is especially true when discussing the last things with dispensationalists, who divide history into various distinct dispensations or periods. But the Bible is clear and consistent in its teaching on the point of Rapture.

What is especially clear in the Bible is that no one is saved by works. Salvation is a matter of God's sovereign grace in Christ and we share in this grace by a Spirit-worked faith. Therefore Reformed Christians have a totally different starting point when it comes to the last things and the end of days.