

Antichrist and Futurism: The Early Church Fathers Were Futurists (but certainly there was no PRE-Tribulation rapture!)

by Anthony Buzzard

The point of this article is, amongst other items, to dispel the falsehood that the Roman Catholics invented futurism!

The earliest post-New Testament writers on prophecy were premillennial, **post-tribulational futurists**:

“Until Augustine in the fourth century, the early Church generally held to the premillenarian understanding of Biblical eschatology. This chiliasm [millennialism] entailed a **futuristic** interpretation of **Daniel’s seventieth week**, the abomination of desolation, and the personal Antichrist. And it was post-tribulational...The possibility of a **pre-tribulational rapture** seems never to have occurred to anyone in the early Church” (Dr. Robert Gundry, *The Church and the Tribulation*, 1973, p. 173).

This fact should put to rest the falsehood that futurism is an invention of Roman Catholic Jesuits, who are wrongly alleged to have attempted to turn away attention from themselves. Whatever assessment one makes of the Roman Catholic system, it is quite mistaken to say that premillennial futurism, with a future 70th week, originates in the Catholic Church.

It is interesting to observe that the distinguished premillennialist Theodor Zahn (1838-1933) states that the final evil ruler in Revelation (much of which is based on Daniel) is “without question” derived from “**the Graeco-Macedonian [kingdom] and its ‘typical’ ruler...Antiochus Epiphanes**” (*Introduction to the New Testament*, Vol. 3, p. 441).

In Daniel 11 and 12 it seems clear that Antiochus is a “type” of the yet future tyrant. Antiochus was a Syrian king. A Latin church father, **Lactantius** (c. 250-330 AD), clearly expected the Beast (Antichrist) to arise in **Syria**:

“Another king shall arise out of **Syria**, born from an evil spirit...and he will constitute and call himself God, and will order himself to be worshipped as the Son of God, and power will be given him to do signs and wonders...Then he will attempt to **destroy the Temple of God**, and persecute the righteous people; and there will be **distress and tribulation** such as there never has been since the beginning of the world” (*Divine Institutes*, Book 7, ch. 17).

In chapter 16 **Lactantius** speaks of the tyrant arising “from the extreme boundaries of the **northern region**.” Another ante-Nicene father, **Victorinus** (c. 280 AD), refers **Micah 5:5** to the antichrist: “There shall be peace for our land...and they shall encircle **Assur [Assyria], that is antichrist**, in the trench of Nimrod” (*Commentary on the Apocalypse*, ch. 7). Assyria is the approximate equivalent of modern Iraq. Other areas of the Middle East could be indicated.

It is not always recognized that the seventieth “week” of Daniel 9:24-27 is taken **by Jesus** to be a period *just before his return*. Jesus places the Abomination shortly before his Second Coming (Matt. 24:15ff). Matthew 24:29 says that “**immediately after**” the tribulation initiated by the Abomination (24:15), Jesus will come back in power and glory (24:29-31). This fact is crucial to a fair reading of prophecy. Daniel expects the Abomination to appear in the seventieth “week” (Dan. 9:27). Jesus expects the Abomination (and therefore the seventieth week in which the Abomination appears) just before his return. That is futurism, as reflected, too, in the earliest premillenarian “fathers.”

That the seventieth “week” was **future** and close to the end of the age was understood in 243 AD by **Hippolytus** (*De Pascha Computus*). This fact is noted in the *Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics*: “**The one ‘week’ [of Daniel 9:24-27] is taken off as belonging to the eschatological period in the future**” (Vol. 3, p. 606).

Irenaeus also expected a **3 ½-year tribulation and a rebuilt temple**:

“In which [**temple**] the enemy shall sit, endeavoring to show himself as Christ, as the Lord also declares: ‘When you shall see the Abomination of Desolation, which has been spoken of by Daniel the prophet, standing in the holy place’...He shall purpose to change times and laws; and [everything] will be given into his hands until a time, times and half a time: that is **for three years and six months**, during which time, when he [antichrist] comes, he will reign over the earth...The abomination of desolation [shall be brought] into **the Temple**; even until the consummation of the time shall the desolation be complete [Dan. 9:27]. Now **three years and six months constitute the half-week**” (*Against Heresies*, Book 5, chs. 25, 26).

Irenaeus sees the Antichrist, not just Antiochus, in the **eighth** chapter of Daniel and quotes **Daniel 9:27** as a prophecy of the final reign of the antichrist “for three years and six months.”

The seventieth week of Daniel 9 was seen as future and close up to the Second Coming by the earliest church fathers who wrote in detail on prophecy. James Montgomery notes that this “apocalyptic” reading of the last period of seven years **is the one found in the gospels (the teaching of Jesus)**, and **it is adopted by Irenaeus and Hippolytus** (*International Critical Commentary on Daniel*, p. 394).

Commodianus refers to a future and final antichrist in these words:

“Isaiah said, ‘This is the man who moves the world and so many kings and under whom the land will become a desert’...Then, doubtless the world will be finished when he appears. He himself will divide the globe into three ruling powers, when however, Nero will be raised up from hell, Elijah will first come to seal the beloved ones; at which things the region of Africa [King of the South?] and the northern nations [King of the North?], the whole earth on all sides will tremble **for seven years**. But Elijah will occupy **half of the time** and Nero the other half. Then the whole Babylon, being reduced to ashes, its embers will then advance to Jerusalem; and the **Latin conqueror** will then say, ‘I am Christ whom you always pray to.’ And indeed the original ones who were deceived combine to praise him. He does many wonders since he is **the false prophet**. Especially that they may believe him, his **image** will speak. The Almighty has given it power to appear such. **The Jews, recapitulating Scriptures from him, exclaim at the same time to the Highest that they have been deceived**...Moreover, when the Tyrant will dash himself against the army of God, his soldiery are overthrown by the celestial terror; the false prophet himself is seized with the wicked one, by the decree of the Lord. They are handed over alive to Gehenna” (*The Writings of Commodianus*, 41, 42).

“He whom Daniel foretells would have dominion for a **time, and times, and an half**, is even already at the door, about to speak blasphemous and daring things against the Most High” (Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho*, ch. 32).

“But when this **Antichrist** shall have devastated all things in this world, he will reign for **three years and six months**, and sit in **the Temple at Jerusalem**; and then the Lord will come from heaven in the clouds, in the glory of the Father, 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; and restoring to Abraham the promised inheritance, in which Kingdom the Lord declared, that ‘many coming from the east and from the west should sit down with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob’” (Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, 5:30.4).

““And to the woman were given two wings of the great eagle, that she might fly into the wilderness, where she is nourished for a **time, and times, and half a time**, from the face of the serpent.’ That refers to the one thousand two hundred and threescore days (the half of the week) during which the tyrant is to reign and persecute the Church” (Hippolytus, *On Christ and the Antichrist*, 61). ✧