The Eschatology Of The Shepherd Of Hermas

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A friend recently began a correspondence with me about eschatology. I consider eschatology (apart from the firm affirmation of a bodily second coming of Christ) a relatively unimportant issue. Not *unimportant*, by any means, just less important by comparison. Specifically, this conversation was less about eschatology than about historical theology. That is, what has the Church believed in history about eschatology. But our conversation took on a much narrower focus still. Was a Dispensational Pre-Millennial view systematically set out by anyone prior to J.N.Darby, or by anyone in any way prior to the Reformation? I asserted that it was not. He encouraged me to "fact-check" such a statement. I was grateful for the encouragement, and look forward to challenging my own thinking. He provided what I trust will be a helpful list of authors whom he kindly suggested held to a pre-tribulational view of the Rapture (i.e., saw the second coming of Christ divided into two stages, one before the tribulation to rescue the church from the tribulation, and one after the tribulation that would usher in a millennial kingdom). I began to glance through his list and examine it. Here are my thoughts from the first author on the list.

Historic Pre-Millennialism in The Shepherd of Hermas

The Shepherd of Hermas (or Hermas, as the work is usually called for short) is an early Christian document that had much relevance for the early church. It dates sometime after John's Apocalypse (I think), and surely sometime before Irenaeus' reference to it (ca. 175). Holmes suggest that its first section could have been written near the end part of the first century or early part of the second, while its second part may well have been penned sometime around the mid second century (for the basic introductory issues, see

"The Apostolic Fathers: Greek Texts And English Translations," 3rd ed., by Michael Holmes, pg. 442-453). As for his eschatology, Hermas undeniably held the common position known today as historic pre-millennialism, as will become evident. He simply doesn't see the second coming as divided into two stages, one being a secret rapture for the church. His basic structure in the work is 5 Visions, then a series of "Commandments" followed by a series of "Parables." Technically, visions 1-4 function together as a sort of "Part 1," while Vision 5 serves to introduce the "Part 2" that is composed then of the Commandments and Parables. It's in the 5 Visions that his eschatology appears. I quote here from the standard critical Greek-English edition by Holmes (which uses the chapter numbers) though I also included the older divisions in case you have one of the older translations.

Tribulation Prior To The Vision Of The Beast

In chapters 6 (part of his second vision 2.2-2.3) we find;

> *"Fifteen days later, after I had fasted and earnestly asked the Lord, the meaning of the writing was revealed to me. And this is what was written: 2 "Your children, Hermas, have rejected God and blasphemed the Lord and by their great evil they have betrayed their parents, and are called betrayers of parents, yet they have not profited from their betrayal. But still they have added licentiousness and orgies of evil to their sins, and so the limit of their transgressions has been reached. 3 But make these words known to all your children, and to your wife, who is about to become like a sister to you, for she does not control her tongue, with which she does evil. But when she hears these words she will control it, and will find mercy. 4 After you have made known to them all these words, which the Master ordered me to reveal to you, then all the sins that they have previously committed will be forgiven them. Indeed, all the saints who have sinned up to this day will be forgiven, if they repent with all their heart and drive away double-mindedness from their heart. 5 For the Master has sworn by his own glory regarding his elect, that if sin still occurs, now that this day has been set as a limit, they will not find salvation, for repentance for the righteous is at an end; the days of repentance for all the saints are over, although for the outsiders there is the possibility of repentance until the last day. 6 So speak, therefore, to the officials of the church, in order that they may direct their ways in righteousness, in order that they may receive the promises in full with much glory. 7* ***You, therefore, who work righteousness must be steadfast, and do not be double-minded, in order that you may gain entrance with the holy angels. Blessed are those of you who patiently endure the coming great tribulation and who will not deny their life. 8 For the Lord has sworn by his Son that those who have denied their Lord have been rejected from their life, that is, those who now are about to deny him in the coming days.*** *But to those who formerly denied him, mercy has been granted because of his great compassion."*

In chapter 6, the meaning of the writing he has seen previously is revealed to him. Part of this revelation is to explain that "You, therefore, who work righteousness must be steadfast, and do not be double-minded, in order that you may gain entrance with the holy angels. Blessed are those of you who patiently endure the coming great tribulation and who will not deny their life. Hermas quite clearly sees the church as going through the Great Tribulation here, and exhorts them to patiently endure during the tribulation.

In 7:1-2 (2:3), "Great Tribulations" (plural) are also mentioned, but here the context is probably that of personal persecutions that he and his family have observed (and through which his children have been found unfaithful, though he has endured). The end could perhaps be in view here, in a proleptic sense in which Hermas sees himself as already living in the end. In this case, yet again, he would be seeing himself as going through the tribulation. But I think this rather unlikely.

> *"But you, Hermas, must no longer bear a grudge against your children, nor allow your sister to*

> *have her way, in order that they may be cleansed from their former sins. For they will be disciplined with a righteous discipline if you do not bear a grudge against them. Bearing a grudge produces death.* ***But you, Hermas, have had great tribulations of your own because of the transgressions of your family****, because you were not concerned about them. Instead you neglected them and became entangled in your own evil transgressions. 2 But your sincerity and great self-control, and the fact that you have not fallen away from the living God, saves you.* ***These things have saved you, if you remain steadfast****, and they save all who practice such things and walk in innocence and sincerity. These people prevail over all evil and will endure to eternal life. (7:1-2 / 2.3)*

in Chapter 7:3-4 (2.3) The revelation about the writing continues, and it is explained to him that;

> *"3 Blessed are all those who practice righteousness; they will never be destroyed. 4 But say to Maximus:* ***'Behold, tribulation is coming; if it seems good to you, deny again.' 'The Lord is near to those who turn to him,'*** *as it is written in the book of Eldad and Modat, who prophesied to the people in the wilderness."*

And here again, Tribulation is seen as something still to come (making it likely that 7:1 refers to personal persecution, I think) and the endurance of it is encouraged. Again, Hermas sees believers going through the tribulation (if the eschatological end is in view here). In a few other passages, mention is made of "tribulation," always along the lines of one of these uses already seen. Carolyn Osiek, in the marvelous Hermenia commentary on the Shepherd, notes,

> "Three different meanings of θλῖψις ("tribulation") can be distinguished in Hermas: the painful results of sin in everyday setbacks (Vis. 2.3.1; Sim. 6.3.3–6; 7.3–7); the result of persecution, including suffering that does not result outright in martyrdom (Vis. 2.3.4; 3.2.1, 6.5; Sim. 9.21.3); the "great coming tribulation" (Vis. 2.2.7; 4.1.1, 2.4–5, 3.6). But the different uses should not be kept too distinct. Sim. 6.3.3–6; 7.3–7 speak of suffering in life as serving the purifying function of leading to conversion. But this suffering is also part of the transformation that must take place in preparation for participation in the building of the tower, sign of movement toward the end time. It would be a mistake to see setbacks in life, like those of Hermas in Vis. 2.3.1; 3.6.7, as disconnected from the larger vision of suffering and tribulation. It is all of a piece, leading to the final consummation."

She herself does not seem to see Hermas as being largely eschatologically oriented, even in his 4th vision which we shall come to next. I disagree at that point, but she is probably correct in noting that the various uses of the word in Hermas should not be too sharply distinguished. The current persecutions which Hermas and his family had faced, and which the church would continue to face, weren't altogether different than those that will be faced at the end, from Hermas' point of view. And in any case, *none of the uses of the word in Hermas suggests that the "tribulation" in view will be escaped by means of a rapture that removes the church from the place of the tribulation.*

Tribulation In The 4th Vision Of The Great Beast

But without a doubt, it is in Hermas' 4th vision that we see most clearly Hermas' view of the end. And that is where we turn now in more detail. In his 4th vision (chapter 22-24), Hermas sees a massive Beast. Here we are in the heart of Hermas' eschatology. And I suspect that the reference sometimes referred to as suggesting a pri-trib rapture comes from here. 23:4b says, *"You have escaped a great tribulation because of your faith, and because you were not double-minded, even though you saw such a huge beast."* And again in 23:5, *"You will be able to escape it"* in relation to the same Great Tribulation. If one takes this phrase completely out of the context of the vision of which it's a part (and out of the context of the book as a whole) it could sound like a reference to a pre-trib rapture, since "escaping the great tribulation" might sound like a rapture that rescues the church by removing them from earth before the tribulation comes.

But this is to ignore the rest of the vision entirely, and to ignore its explanation as explicitly given in chapter 24, which make abundantly clear that exactly the opposite is meant (to say nothing of the fact that this reading is deeply anachronistic in importing a modern system into an ancient document). Read the vision in its full context, and its orientation is abundantly clear. Hermas prays for additional revelation in 22:3, and explains in 22:1 that what he was shown was *"a foreshadowing of the impending persecution."* In chapter 23, it will be explained explicitly that, *"this beast is a foreshadowing of the great tribulation that is coming."* That is, this whole vision is clearly about the coming tribulation. He sets out the vision itself and how it came upon him in chapter 22.

> *"What I saw, brothers and sisters, twenty days after the previous vision occurred, was a foreshadowing of the impending persecution. 2 I was going into the country by the Campanian Way. The place is a little over a mile from the public road, and is easily reached. 3 So, as I was walking by myself, I asked the Lord to complete the revelations and visions that he showed to me through his holy church, in order that he might strengthen me and grant repentance to his servants who had stumbled, so that his great and glorious name might be glorified, because he considered me worthy to show his wonders to me. 4 And as I was glorifying him and giving him thanks, the sound, as it were, of a voice answered me: "Do not be double-minded, Hermas." I began to discuss this with myself and to say, "How can I be double-minded when I have been so firmly established by the Lord and have seen glorious things?" 5 And I went on a little farther, brothers and sisters, and behold, I saw a cloud of dust rising up, as it were, to heaven, and I began to say to myself, "Maybe some cattle are coming and raising a cloud of dust?" And it was about two hundred yards away from me. 6 As the cloud of dust grew larger and larger, I began to suspect that it was something supernatural. Then the sun shone a little more brightly, and behold, I saw a huge beast, like some sea monster, and from its mouth flaming locusts were pouring out. And the beast was about one hundred feet long, and it had a head like a ceramic jar. 7 And I began to cry and to beg the Lord to rescue me from it. And I remembered the word that I had heard: "Do not be double-minded, Hermas." 8 So, brothers and sisters, having put on the faith of the Lord and remembering the great things he had taught me, I took courage and faced the beast. And the beast was coming on with such a rush that it could have destroyed a city. 9 I came near it, and huge though it was, the sea monster stretched itself out on the ground and merely thrust out its tongue, and did not even twitch until I had passed by it. 10 And the beast had four colors on its head: black, then the color of fire and blood, then gold, and then white."*

Richard Buckham's masterful study of the Great Tribulation in Hermas explains the import of what this beast is well. He notes, "The beast is explained in xxiii. 5 as a figure (τυπος) of the imminent great tribulation. To the threat of this tribulation Christians may react in two different ways: their faith may waver (doubleminded- ness) (xxiii. 4) or they may repent and prepare themselves to face it (xxiii. 5). The doubleminded will be 'hurt' (xxiii. 4) by the great tribulation and thereby experience God's wrath (xxiii. 6). The repentant, on the other hand, will put complete trust in the Lord (xxiii. 4 f.), face the tribulation with courage (xxiii. 8), and 'escape' (xxiii. 4)." (Bauckham, Richard, "The Great Tribulation In The Shepherd Of Hermas," pg. 31).

Note that Hermas is encouraged not to be "double-minded." This is one of the major themes of the book, which seeks repeatedly to encourage faithful endurance in the face of persecution, the opposite of which is consistently painted as "double-mindedness." Hermas then sees a massive dust cloud coming at him fast, about 200 yards away. As it gets closer, he realizes it is something supernatural (θεῖον). He realizes it is a huge beast, comperable to the "Leviathan" of OT imagry, from the mouth of which flaming locusts are pouring. He begins to beg God to rescue him, and he hears the word again about double-mindedness, meaning, "just endure." He explains that then, "So, brothers and sisters, having put on the faith of the Lord

and remembering the great things he had taught me, *I took courage and faced the beast*." (22:8). He confronts the beast head on. But the most amazing thing happens. The beast comes on him with such a rush that it could level a city (22:8), but stops in front of him, lays down on the ground, sticks its tongue out, and doesn't so much as twitch. He has faced the beast but not been hurt by it. He moves on past it, and as he does, he sees that its head has four colors on it. Black, red (the color of fire and gold), gold, and white. He then meets a young lady, all in white, who he recognizes, from before, as the church. This woman has been with him throughout mediating the visions to him. But strangely, she is now young, and purified. When he met her before (vision 1.2, chapter 2), she was an elderly woman. The woman teasingly asks him if anything had met him along the way. He replies, ""Lady, a beast so huge that it could destroy entire peoples, but by the power of the Lord and by his great mercy *I escaped it*." (The verse mentioned at the outset). Out of context, one might think this to mean that he was raptured before any tribulation came his way. But one can see in the vision, the tribulation came directly at him, *and he confronted it face to face.* He didn't get teleported away. Rather, he faced the beast, yet it had no power over him because of his endurance. The women explains that God's grace is what caused him to face the beast and remain unhurt by it.

> *"You deserved to escape it," she said, "because you cast your cares on God and opened your heart to the Lord, believing that you could not be saved by anything except the great and glorious Name. Therefore the Lord sent his angel who has authority over the beasts, whose name is Thegri, and* ***he shut its mouth so that it might not hurt you.*** *You have* ***escaped a great tribulation because of your faith,*** *and because* ***you were not double-minded****, even though* ***you saw such a huge beast****."*

Note that he didn't escape the beast by *not* facing it - he escaped *by* facing it, and yet an angel shut its mouth so it couldn't hurt him. A rapture-esque escape would be more like the "rescue" for which he prayed, but wasn't given. Instead, he was given an "escape" that would demand facing rather than avoiding the beast. Like Daniel in the lion's den, his safety didn't come by avoiding the lions, but by the angels who rendered them harmless over him (he seems to be even directly alluding to the text in Daniel). Note also that the woman now directly identifies the beast. What is it that he has faced in his vision? It is the Great Tribulation (μεγαλην θλιψιν). He didn't avoid the Great Tribulation. He faced it head on, with encouragement to endure. He escaped it, not be being removed from it, but precisely by enduring in the face of it. That is, he escaped, *"even though you saw such a great beast."* Bauckham again explains well,

> "Equally the 'escape' of the faithful cannot be taken literally. Comparison with vi. 7 f. (where the idea of the great tribulation is first introduced, in the context of the revealed call to repentance) shows that εκφευγειν is equivalent to υπομενειν: the faithful 'escape' the tribulation by enduring and not denying the Lord. Υπομονη is the characteristic New Testament apocalyptic virtue of patient suffering under persecution (Rom. v. 3 f.; Lk. xxi. 19; 1 Pet. ii. 20; Rev. i. 9, etc.): 'he who endures to the end will be saved' (Mk. xiii. 13). The benediction of vi. 7 and the exhortation of xxiv. 6 (in which 'escaping' becomes Εαν δε ηυμεις θελησητε, ουδεν εσται) should be com- pared with John's repeated 'call for the endurance of the saints' (Rev. xiii. 10; xiv. 12) in the context of another vision of suffering at the hands of an apocalyptic monster. Daniel in the lions' den (the source of the image in xxiii. 4) therefore prefigures the spiritual, not the physical, safety of Christians in the great tribulation." (Bauckham, pg. 31).

The women then commands him to tell the other believers that they too can "escape" (that is, safely persevere in the face of) this coming tribulation, if they face it with faithful endurance and obedience. She again explicitly identifies the beast with the coming Great Tribulation. Note that he isn't told to tell *unbelievers* that they can escape it if they become believers and so get whisked away, but rather *believers* whose endurance will show their real faith. If Hermas understood the Great Tribulation to be something escaped by becoming a Christian, the encouragement would be, "How to escape the tribulation by becoming a believer so as not to be left behind." Instead, she says,

> *"Go, therefore, and declare to **the Lord's elect** his mighty works, and tell them that **this beast is a foreshadowing of the great tribulation that is coming.** So, **if you prepare yourselves in advance** and turn to the Lord with all your heart, **you will be able to escape it**, **if your heart is clean and unblemished** and you serve the Lord blamelessly **for the rest of the days of your life**. Cast your cares upon the Lord, and he will set them straight. 6 Trust in the Lord, **you who are double-minded**, because he can do all things; he both turns his wrath away from you and sends out plagues upon you who are double-minded. Woe to those who hear these words and disobey them; it would have been better for them not to have been born."*

Explanation Of The Colors Of The Beast's Head

All of this makes it unmistakably clear that Hermas believes that the Church will face the Great Tribulation. That's why they need this warning to be obedient and faithful when it comes. But this is even further clarified if one only reads into the next chapter. For here the element of the colors on the beast's head are explained. Chapter 24 reads,

> *"I asked her about the four colors that the beast had on its head. And she answered me and said, "Again you are curious about such things!" "Yes, lady," I said. "Tell me what these are." 2 "Listen," she said. "The black is this world in which you live. 3 The color of fire and blood signifies that this world must be destroyed by blood and fire. 4 You who have escaped from this world are the gold part, **for just as gold is tested by fire and made useful, so also you who live in them are being tested.** Therefore **those who endure and pass through the flames will be purified by them**. For just as gold casts off its dross, so also you will cast away all grief and distress, **and will be purified** and useful for the building of the tower. 5 The white part is the age to come, in which God's elect will live because those chosen by God for eternal life will be spotless and pure. 6 Therefore do not cease speaking to the ears of the saints. **You have also the foreshadowing of the great tribulation that is coming. But if you are willing, it will be nothing.** Remember what has already been written." 7 With these words she left, and I did not see where she went, for there was a noise, and I turned back in fear, thinking that the beast was coming.""*

She explains that black represents the world, or the current age, in which he lives. Fire-red represents the coming destruction of the world. Gold represents the church tried and refined by living in the blood and fire destruction. It is in this fire and gold that the church "lives." White represents the world to come, in which the purified church will live. The church will face the "blood and fire" destruction in the Great Tribulation which the Beast represents. But how will they become the church "spotless and pure" in the kingdom to come which the white represents? How does the Church make this transition between the ages? How is the eschatological tower built, and the old woman made young? The message is plain, *"For just as gold is tested by fire and made useful, so also you who live in them are being tested. Therefore those who endure and pass through the flames will be purified by them. For just as gold casts off its dross, so also you will cast away all grief and distress, and will be purified and useful for the building of the tower."* The church will be purified *by passing faithfully through* the tribulation. If faithful, she will "escape" the Great Tribulation, not in the sense of not facing it - she will face it head on! - but in the sense of enduring faithfully *through* it.

It simply could not be more clear that Hermas sees the church going through the Great Tribulation. Teaching this is literally the point of the entire vision. The Great Tribulation is the means by which the church passes from the first age (black) to the last age (white). Bauckham explains,

> "The great tribulation is therefore the means of transition from this age to the next (and to this extent its function is exactly parallel to that of the period of tribulation, cosmic upheaval, or 'Messianic woes' frequently described in Jewish apocalyptic). The function of the two intermediate colors is to explain how this transition is effected. Red symbolizes the effect of the great tribulation on 'this world': 'The colour of fire and blood means it is necessary for this world to be destroyed by blood and fire' (xxiv. 3). Gold represents its effect on the Church, a purifying effect by which Christians are made 'useful in the construction of the tower', i.e. fit to be part of the eschatological Church of the next world (xxiv. 4)." (Bauckham, pg. 33).

Preparing the church to endure the Great Tribulation is the whole point of Vision 4.

But even if the historic pre-mill position of Hermas weren't clear already, note that the next and final vision (which opens the commandments section) is that of the beautiful arrival of "The Shepherd." Modern exegetes often debate whether this Shepherd is Christ or an appearance of someone like "the Angel of the Lord" of the OT, but the early church usually read it as a reference to Jesus, and in fact this is why most early Christian art came to picture Jesus primarily as a Shepherd (as in the title picture). By drawing on Jesus' "Shepherd" discourse (John 10), Hermas sees Jesus through this lens, and the Shepherd finally arrives in Vision 5, "to live with you the rest of the days of your life." He describes the vision of this arrival as follows,

> *"After I had prayed in my house and sat down on my bed, there came a man glorious in appearance, dressed like a shepherd, with a white skin wrapped around him and with a bag on his shoulders and a staff in his hand. He greeted me, and I greeted him in return. 2 He immediately sat down beside me and said to me, "I was sent by the most holy angel to live with you the rest of the days of your life." 3 I thought that he had come to tempt me, and I said to him, "Well, who are you? For I know," I said, "to whom I have been entrusted." He said to me, "Do you not recognize me?" "No," I replied. "I am," he said, "the shepherd to whom you were entrusted." 4 While he was still speaking, his appearance was changed, and I recognized him as the one to whom I was entrusted; and immediately I was confused, and fear seized me, and I was completely overwhelmed with sorrow, because I had answered him so wickedly and foolishly."*

But note that *this arrival of the Shepherd comes only after the Beast (the Great Tribulation) has come and gone*. This Vision is where the book gets its name. The point is, only by a gross misreading of Hermas could anyone suggest that he held to a pre-trib rapture. Any examination of Vision 4 makes this abundantly clear. Such a suggestion is simply not being honest with Hermas, and is sadly ignorant of the primary and standard secondary sources. Any straightforward reading of the text makes it abundantly clear that Hermas held to the historical pre-millennial view. This doesn't by any means settle the issue of eschatology, or of the timing of the rapture. But it does mean that anyone who uses a proof-text from Hermas to claim that he is support for early patristic belief in a pre-trib rapture is simply not conversant with the primary sources. There is no such support in Hermas himself. Only in the wishful thinking of those who would make such a claim.

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