

JAMES HALL BROOKES: EARLY PRETRIBULATIONAL RAPTURE PIONEER

Tom's Perspectives

by Thomas Ice

Many today are surprised to find out that a majority of the advocates of dispensational pretribulational premillennialism before World War I were from Presbyterian circles. James Hall Brookes (1830-1897) a well-known Presbyterian minister in his day is considered the father of American pretribulationism and dispensationalism. Brookes was one of the first to teach the pre-trib rapture and the accompanying dispensational truths in post-Civil War America. His ministry was characterized by devotion to a verse-by-verse biblical exposition of Scripture and a robust assertion and defense of the full and inerrant inspiration of Holy Writ. He was a greatly loved pastor great who exhibited great personal integrity and spirituality, and exercised great national influence both within his denomination and throughout Evangelicalism.¹

EARLY LIFE

Brookes was born February 27, 1830, in Pulaski, Tennessee. James' father, a Presbyterian minister, died of cholera in June 1833 leaving the family and James in a poor financial state. Both of James' grandfathers were Presbyterian ministers as well. Brookes apparently became a Believer in Christ at the age of eight and also began supporting himself at that time as well. At age 14 Brookes was offered an appointment to the U. S. Military Academy at West Point, but he turned it down desiring instead to prepare for the ministry. Most of James' education, up to age 14, had been provided by his mother, who was well educated and most capable of providing an excellent education. At age 16 James became a schoolmaster in Pulaski, Tennessee and saved as much money as he could in order to pay for a college education.

James ended up starting his college career at age 20 and entered Miami University at Oxford, Ohio, and was given advanced standing in the junior class because of academic abilities and prior training. During his last year as an undergraduate, Brookes undertook additional studies at Union Presbyterian Seminary at Oxford, in order to better equip himself for ministerial training at Princeton. Brookes graduated from Miami University in 1853 and entered Princeton Theological Seminary in New Jersey the same year. Brookes not only received a college degree in Miami, it was there that he found his wife, Susan Oliver, daughter of a prominent physician. Susan was said to be exceptionally beautiful and well educated, who would make an ideal minister's wife as she became for James Hall Brookes. They were married on May 2, 1854 in Dayton, Ohio, where Brookes became pastor of the First Presbyterian Church. James graduated from Princeton Seminary, at that time considered the most conservative and top Seminary in America, in 1854 and was ordained by the seminary upon graduation.

PASTORAL LIFE

From 1854 until 1858 Brookes pastored his first church in Dayton. He was then called to pastor the Second Presbyterian Church in Saint Louis, Missouri. Saint Louis is where he would remain until his death in 1897. When the Civil War broke out in the early 1860s, a series of events led to Brooke's resignation from his church. The very next day in 1864 Brookes was called to a new church plant and accepted the call to the Sixteenth and Walnut Street Presbyterian Church, which is where he would pastor until his death (which later moved and became the Washington and Compton Avenue

Presbyterian Church). The new Presbyterian Church would rapidly grow into the largest and most influential church in Saint Louis.

Brookes' preaching was extremely popular everywhere he spoke. He was a pioneer in his day with his emphasis on the exposition of the English Bible at a time when most gave theological treatises from the pulpit. One of his biographers noted he held these views even while at Seminary.

He also held that the Theological seminaries did not make enough of the English Bible. He, the English Bible's Champion, often spoke out and spared not when discussing that point. He said the average seminary graduate "knew too much about the Bible, but not enough of the Bible."²

While not neglecting the important role of Greek and Hebrew for the Bible expositor, Brookes would provide a great legacy that was followed by the great verse-by-verse teachers for the last 150 years. This emphasis on the English Bible was at the heart of the founding of the first ever Bible Exposition department by the founders of Dallas Theological Seminary.

MINISTRY AND INFLUENCE

Without question, during the last third of the nineteenth century, Brookes was the most famous and influential Presbyterian minister in America. He began his writing ministry in the 1860s and produced at least 26 published books about 200 tracts. In the early 1870s he published *Maranatha*, a comprehensive work on eschatology that was to be one of his most popular works teaching the pre-trib rapture. Other books on prophecy included *Israel and the Church*, *Bible Reading on the Second Coming*, and *Till He Come* (later retitled *I Am Coming*). Brookes took a strong stand on the full inspiration of Scripture at a time when liberal, critical views of the Bible were coming into the Presbyterian Church and other American denominations when he wrote *God Spake All These Words*.

In 1875, Brookes began a monthly periodical called *The Truth or Testimony for Christ* that eventually had a circulation of more than 40,000. He continued to serve as the editor until his death, and through this publication he encouraged Christians in evangelism, issues of daily sanctification, Bible study, and the study of prophecy. After his death, the periodical merged with *The Watchword* and became known as *The Watchword and Truth*.

During all of his years of ministry, Brookes was an active participant in denominational and interdenominational events. James was elected moderator of the general assembly multiple times, which was the top office within his American denomination. He was a regular speaker at Bible conferences, Y. M. C. A. meetings, and prophecy conferences and in 1875 was one of the founders and president of an annual conference that eventually became known as the Niagara Bible Conference. This annual event at Niagara-on-the-Lake, Ontario, Canada, became the premier conference for Bible students in the latter years of the nineteenth century. During its existence, the conference was interdenominational and premillennial. It was staunchly pretribulational in perspective until pretribulational and posttribulational controversy broke into the open after the death of Brookes. Doctrinal controversy, location uncertainties, and the death of Brookes led to its decline, and in 1900 the final conference was held. Brookes Bible Institute in Saint Louis was named after Dr. Brookes and is today called Brookes Bible College. Throughout its years, Brookes had

been the undisputed leader and through his efforts premillennialism and dispensationalism was widely disseminated across denominational boundaries within conservative Protestantism.

BIBLE PROPHECY INFLUENCE

Brookes was one of the most prominent and fervent students of prophecy of his era. In an 1896 article in *The Truth*, "How I Became a Premillennialist," Brookes claimed he came to his premillennial eschatology through his own reading and study of Revelation and Daniel after entering the pastorate and after many years of the neglect of prophecy. This independent study, along with some influence in the years after the Civil War from Plymouth Brethren, provided the historical background of his beliefs. He hosted British Brethren leader John Nelson Darby at his church on multiple occasions, but Brookes denied that he was the direct recipient of Brethren eschatology, although he did acknowledge an appreciation of their eschatological enthusiasm. As early as 1871, Brookes was publishing and teaching views similar to dispensationalism. By 1874 his system was well-developed, and it was Brookes who would introduce C. I. Scofield, shortly after his conversion, to the teachings of dispensational premillennialism. It would be through Scofield and his study Bible that Brookes would have his most lasting influence.

Brookes was well-versed in the eschatological options within premillennialism and argued against both a partial rapture theory and posttribulationism. He refused to set dates for the rapture and held to a strong doctrine of the Lord's return and imminence. "How thrilling the thought, that the first of these startling events, the coming of Christ for the saints, may occur at any hour".³ He was very much aware of the charge by uninformed critics that dispensationalists taught more than one way of salvation, and he adamantly rebutted it in writing, "It is needless to remind any ordinary reader of the sacred Scriptures that from the opening verses of Genesis, down to Malachi, the Spirit is brought into view in creation, providence, and redemption, and that all who are saved were quickened into life through His divine power and grace, as they are now".⁴

One scholar wrote in a PhD dissertation, "James Brookes had a tremendous impact on the American religious scene. He had a crucial role in the development and spread of American dispensational premillennialism and thus ultimately on American Fundamentalism. Through his writings, his leadership of the Niagara Bible Conference, and his personal relationships he affected an entire generation of premillennial leaders. His impact is difficult to overestimate. Despite this importance, he remains relatively neglected."⁵

Brookes had a highly developed version of dispensational theology, which he pioneered and spread throughout North America through his preaching, writing, and influence as the President of the Niagara Bible Conference. He also set a standard for Evangelical theology as a result of the Niagara doctrinal statement that he wrote. He vigorously pursued Christ by building his theology upon the Bible and the Bible alone. "James H. Brookes deserves a noble position in the memories of those today who, like him, seek to honor Biblical truth."⁶ Brookes is a worthy American father of the Bible exposition movement, futurist premillennialism, dispensationalism, and the pre-trib rapture. It is sad to see such a healthy emphasis in such decline in our own day, even among churches, denominations, and associations which once prospered when they followed his lead. Maranatha!

ENDNOTES

¹ I have relied greatly upon an article by Timothy Demy, "James Hall Brookes" <http://www.pretrib.org/data/pdf/Demy-JamesHallBookes.pdf>.

² David Riddle Williams, *James H. Brookes: A Memoir* (St. Louis: Presbyterian Board of Publication, 1897), pp. 58–59.

³ James H. Brookes, *Maranatha: or The Lord Cometh*, 10th edition (New York: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1889), p. 540.

⁴ James H. Brookes, *Israel and the Church: The Terms Distinguished as Found in the Word of God* (Chicago: The Bible Institute Colportage Association, 188?), p. 38.

⁵ Carl E. Sanders II, "The Premillennial Faith of James Hall Brookes" (PhD dissertation, Dallas Theological Seminary, 1995), p. 202.

⁶ Larry Dean Pettegrew, "The Historical and Theological Contributions of the Niagara Bible Conference to American Fundamentalism" (ThD dissertation, Dallas Theological Seminary, 1976), p. 161.