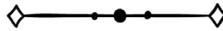


# DISCOVERING DISPENSATIONALISM



TRACING THE DEVELOPMENT OF DISPENSATIONAL THOUGHT  
FROM THE FIRST TO THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

CORY M. MARSH AND JAMES I. FAZIO  
EDITORS

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*Discovering Dispensationalism: Tracing the Development of Dispensational Thought  
from the First to the Twenty-First Century*

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**John Nelson Darby  
(1800–1882)**

—Max S. Weremchuk—

**The Man and His Curious Legacy**

JOHN NELSON DARBY (1800–1882) has been widely hailed as the “father of modern dispensationalism” by critics and admirers alike. Born in 1800 in London as the youngest son of a wealthy merchant family with roots in Ireland, he attended Westminster Public School (1812–1815) and later went on to study at Trinity College, Dublin, Ireland (1815–1819). Completing his studies there he returned to London for legal training at Lincoln’s Inn (1820–1821), only to return to Ireland again to work as an Anglican clergyman for several years in County Wicklow (1825–1828). Growing dissatisfaction with conditions within the Established Church led him to become associated with a small group in Dublin that history has come to know as the “Plymouth Brethren,” and he would emerge as that movement’s leader with his views largely defining its practice and theology. Besides his voluminous written ministry of theology still in print today, three Bible translations—German, French and English—are connected with his name. He passed away in Bournemouth, England in 1882 after having spent much of his life traveling extensively in Britain, Europe, North America, the West Indies, Australia and New Zealand.

Though long neglected, more and more scholarly research devoted to Darby and his views is being produced in recent years, with a seemingly endless stream of books, theological papers, and doctoral theses produced each year. The reason for this is largely attributed to the fact that Darby’s views on prophecy came to dominate large portions of evangelical Christianity, and thus his influence reached far beyond the confines of the Brethren group with which he was intimately associated. Yet, curiously, most who value his prophetic teaching, specifically as regards the pre-tribulation rapture, have no connection to the Plymouth Brethren at all, and most do

not share Darby's views on the Church—though he taught that a proper understanding of the latter is what leads to an apprehension of the former.<sup>1</sup>

Indeed, dispensationalist views have continued to change since Darby's time, but nevertheless the present, modern form can be easily traced back to him and not to versions which preceded him. The controversy over Darby's originality will probably never be laid to rest. It is clear that Darby did not develop his ideas in a vacuum. Regardless of how original or novel he might have been he did not receive some revelation separated from all that had happened before him or was taking place around him. Many have tried to discover what they believe may have been the direct source of his ideas, especially as regards the pre-tribulation rapture, but in the estimation of this author, this is a futile effort. Darby's brother-in-law, the later Lord Chief Justice Edward Pennefather (1774–1847), is reported to have hoped that through Darby's legal training he might “reduce the [then] legal chaos to order.”<sup>2</sup> Though Pennefather's hope was never realized, one could apply his assessment to Darby's unique contribution to the theological world. Surrounded by a multitude of views and opinions on the Church and its future, Darby was able to sift, sort, filter, and ultimately settle upon a resolution which answered the questions of his day; thus, reducing the theological chaos to a semblance of order. Rather than move with the current, Darby often reacted against trending views. This is reflected in what he once wrote about his own reading methods: “In general, I like better reading what is not according to my own thought, because one always gains (if there is piety, and the foundations are solid) something by reading it.”<sup>3</sup>

Ultimately, Darby's teachings and writings are what gave present day dispensationalism its direction. For this reason, the focus of this chapter will not be on how or through whom Darby may have been influenced, nor how accurate his recollections as to when he understood a certain concept were, which is a study unto itself. Many newer works dealing with Darby have been necessarily more critical of him in this regard,<sup>4</sup> but his writings were those which first defined a small group and then

<sup>1</sup> This is particularly true in America. Writing from New York in 1874 Darby observed: “I came here, though I thought I had done with these parts, because the last time I was here I found the doors opening among the Americans. . . . Eminent ministers preach the Lord's coming, the ruin of the church, liberty of ministry, and avowedly from brethren's books, and stay where they are, and there is a general deadening of conscience.” *Letters of J. N. D.* (Lancing: Kingston Bible Trust, n.d.), 2:308. Hereafter as *Letters*.

<sup>2</sup> W. G. Turner, *John Nelson Darby*, ed. E. N. Cross (London: Chapter Two, 1990), 16.

<sup>3</sup> *Letters*, 3:255.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Donald Harman Akenson, *Discovering the End of Time: Irish Evangelicals in the Age of Daniel O'Connell* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2016); and, *Exporting the Rapture:*

came to influence far more people worldwide than were ever numbered among the Plymouth Brethren. Therefore, this chapter will draw largely from the statements as found in his *Collected Writings* and published *Letters* as such and not attempt to determine *when* he might have exactly come to a particular insight. In addition, the chapter will seek to present Darby's unique contribution to dispensational thought in a broad sense without delving into the details of his prophetic views on the books as Daniel or Revelation.

### The Beginning of the End

During the period surrounding Darby, “Last Things” and “End Times” were all the rage. John Beer in his paper, “Romantic Apocalypses,” summed up the time just before Darby's birth in the following way:

At all events, there were in every age elements that caught the eye of those who were looking for its [the Book of Revelation] fulfillment. Overarching all was the prophecy of the Last Things, including universal ruin, and of a new kingdom lasting a thousand years. But how these things were interpreted was partly a matter of individual temperament. At this time, in the 1790s, as has been suggested, such considerations were dominated by horror at the violent outcome of the French Revolution, and then by a feeling of being let down when the seemingly imminent apocalypse failed to happen.<sup>5</sup>

Interest in prophecy and the last things did not abate at the beginning of the 19th century. To the contrary, it increased. Many were convinced that the end was very near. Just one example from 1807:

But although no one can say how near, or how distant, the time may be, when God will fulfil his promises to the Jewish nation; yet it is certain there never were so many reasons for concluding it not to be very far off, as at present. We live in awful times. . . . Events the most alarming follow each other in quick succession. . . . Palestine itself is becoming the scene of contest; . . .opinions are set afloat. . .which attack also truth and justice, and threaten to overthrow the whole fabric of human things, good and bad, and reduce them all to one heap

*John Nelson Darby and the Victorian Conquest of North-American Evangelicalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018).

<sup>5</sup> John Beer, “Romantic Apocalypses,” in *Romanticism and Millenarianism*, ed. Tim, Fulford (Palgrave: New York, 2002), 59.

of ruin. If it please God to suffer it to be so, may it be preparatory to a new creation!<sup>6</sup>

Among the many publications on prophetic events were Lewis Way's *Latter Rain* (1821); George Stanley Faber's *Treatise on the Genius and Object of the Patriarchal, the Levitical, and the Christian, Dispensations* (1823); Edward Irving's introductory comments and translation of Manuel de Lacunza's, *The Coming of Messiah in Glory and Majesty* (1827); Henry Drummond's *Dialogues on Prophecy* (1828/29) and so on. The Jews, their restoration to the land of Israel, the ruin of the Church, coming judgment—all this permeated the ethos at the time. Darby would eventually become involved in it all and give it a direction with effects lasting to the present day.

Two important events occurred during Darby's time as a clergyman in County Wicklow which would determine his future and ultimately result in many Christians coming to a new and different understanding of the future. The first involved Darby's perception of Archbishop William Magee's (1766–1831) actions that he and other clergy had undertaken provoking Darby to write his *Considerations addressed to the Archbishop of Dublin and the Clergy who signed the Petition to the House of Commons for Protection*.<sup>7</sup> Though relevant, that is not the principal issue in the present consideration.

The second event was a riding accident in late 1827 that incapacitated him and required him to stay at his brother-in-law Edward Pennefather's house in Dublin for three months to recuperate:

An accident happened which laid me aside for a time; my horse was frightened and had thrown me against a doorpost. During my solitude conflicting thoughts increased; but much exercise of soul had the effect of causing the scriptures to gain complete ascendancy over me. I had always owned them to be the word of God.<sup>8</sup>

I add that at the same period [1827/28] in which I was brought to liberty and to believe, with divinely given faith, in the presence of the Holy Spirit, I passed through the deepest possible exercise as to the authority of the word: whether if the world and the Church (that is, as an external thing, for it yet had certain traditional power over me as such) disappeared and were annihilated, and the

<sup>6</sup> Bicheno, James, *The Restoration of the Jews, The Crisis of All Nations*, 2nd ed. (London: J. Barfield, 1807), 229–230.

<sup>7</sup> J. N. Darby, *Collected Writings of J. N. Darby* (Lancing: Kingston Bible Trust), 1:1. Hereafter as *CW*.

<sup>8</sup> *Letters*, 3:298.

word of God alone remained as an invisible thread over the abyss, my soul would trust in it. After deep exercise of soul I was brought by grace to feel I could entirely. I never found it fail me since. I have often failed; but I never found it failed me.<sup>9</sup>

Looking back many years later in 1863, with the hindsight of the intervening years, Darby wrote of that period in his life:

I am daily more struck with the connection of the great principles on which my mind was exercised by and with God, when I found salvation and peace, and the questions agitated and agitating the world at the present day: the absolute, divine authority and certainty of the Word, as a divine link between us and God, if everything (church and world) went; personal assurance of salvation in a new condition by being in Christ; the church as His body; Christ coming to receive us to Himself; and collaterally with that, the setting up of a new earthly dispensation, from Isaiah xxxii. (more particularly the end); all this was when laid aside at E. P.'s in 1827; the house character of the assembly [Church] on earth (not the fact of the presence of the Spirit) was subsequently. It was a vague fact which received form in my mind long after, that there must be a wholly new order of things, if God was to have His way, and the craving of the heart after it I had felt long before.<sup>10</sup>

Darby's interest in prophetic themes seems to have come later (which is not to say he had no interest in the subject previously, as his comments regarding Christ's appearing demonstrate).<sup>11</sup> In the beginning he was more occupied with questions as to his own personal salvation, ones which had troubled him for some seven years, while at the same time struggling to come to a proper understanding of the true character of the Church. This period was significant in the development of Darby's ideas, as his understanding of personal salvation and the character of the Church as made up of those who, like him, were recipients of the unifying power of the Holy Spirit, and thus formed the body and bride of Christ—something totally new in God's dealings with humanity—would serve as the foundation for his views on prophecy. Once

<sup>9</sup> *CW*, 1:37.

<sup>10</sup> *Letters*, 1:344–345.

<sup>11</sup> Darby stated, "Before ever I knew about the Lord's coming, I think I loved His appearing. I knew nothing about the doctrine, but the principle of loving His appearing was in my mind, though I could not define it." J. N. Darby, *Notes and Jottings from Various Meetings with J.N. Darby* (Lancing: Kingston Bible Trust, n.d.), 99. Hereafter as *Notes and Jottings*. See also his exclamation dated Lord's Day, April 8, 1827: "Oh! for His appearing. Yet I know the love which causes Him to bear long." See J. N. Darby, *Notes and Comments* (Lancing: Kingston Bible Trust, n.d.), 6:261. Hereafter as *Notes and Comments*.

Darby became actively involved with prophetic subjects there was from much to choose: amillennialist, premillennialist, postmillennialist, historicist, and futurist views. There were Christians who expected a restoration of the Jews to the land of Israel as a fulfillment of Old Testament prophecies and promises. There were others who continued to view those same biblical passages as fulfilled in and through the Church. There were Christians still employing the principle of “one day = one year” when interpreting passages in the book of Daniel and making applications to Napoleon and the French Revolution and calculating when Christ would return. There were Christians who viewed those days as being literal days.<sup>12</sup> There were those speaking of hope for the Church and others, such as Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1772–1834) and James Hatley Frere (1779–1866), who viewed all in ruins and saw the future as bringing only judgment.

Francis William Newman (1805–1897), the younger brother of John Henry Newman, the later Catholic convert and cardinal who was at Lincoln’s Inn at the same time Darby was and with whom Darby would interact years later, was a tutor for the Pennefather children while Darby was recuperating at their home. His description of Darby in his *Phases of Faith* has become something of a classic in the study of Darby and Brethren history, but I only quote Newman’s following comments:

My study of the New Testament at this time had made it impossible for me to overlook that the apostles held it to be a duty of all disciples to expect a near

<sup>12</sup> E.g., the librarian of the Archbishop of Canterbury Samuel Roffey Maitland (1792–1866) who had been influenced by the writings of the Jesuit Francisco Ribera (1537–1591). Darby interacted with Maitland on the question of days and years in 1830 at a time when he (Darby) himself was not yet clear on the subject. See *CW*, 2:32. In fact, Darby was still opposed to the day = day view at the Powerscourt Conference on October 5th, 1831 and defended the day = year interpretation while considering arguments against it as being misleading and absurd. See “1831 Powerscourt Notebooks,” Powerscourt Conferences, Brethren Archive, 1:37, accessed November 19, 2021, <https://www.brethrenarchive.org/features/powerscourt/>. I am indebted to James Fazio for bringing this important information to my attention in “John Nelson Darby’s Early Resistance to Pre-Tribulational Premillennialism As Expressed at the 1831 Powerscourt Prophecy Conference,” (paper presented at the Evangelical Theological Society National Conference, November 17–19, 2020), conference topic: “Christian History and Thought Since 1700.” Later Darby accepted the day = day view. Writing in 1847 he remarked: “A single remark will suffice concerning the calculations of dates that have been made; I have made them myself, and I have taken all possible pains to resolve that of the ‘two thousand three hundred days’ ([Dan. 8] v. 14), so that I do not mean it as condemning others, when I avow that I do not think they can be counted as years, and I am inclined to believe that these days were accomplished of old.” *CW*, 5:158.

and sudden destruction of the earth by fire, and constantly to be expecting the *return of the Lord from heaven*.<sup>13</sup>

This may have been Newman's view and it reflected that of others at the time, but it was not quite Darby's view. From John Gifford Bellett, a good friend from Trinity days who remained so a lifelong, we have the following:

In the beginning of 1828 I had occasion to go to London and then I met in private and heard in public those who were warm and alive on prophetic truth, having had their minds freshly illuminated by it. In my letters to J. N. D. at this time, I told him I had been hearing things that he and I had never yet talked of, and I further told him on my return to Dublin what they were. Full of this subject as I was, I found him quite prepared for it also, and his mind and soul had travelled rapidly in the direction which had thus been given to it.<sup>14</sup>

Darby was very probably referring to the above when he wrote, "At the time I was ill with my knee, ... J. G. Bellett came up and said they were teaching some new thing in England. 'I have it!' I said."<sup>15</sup> What was this new thing Darby claimed to already know?

Isaiah 32 it was that taught me about the new dispensation. I saw there would be a David reign, and did not know whether the Church might not be removed before 40 years time. At that time I was ill with my knee. It gave me peace to see what the Church was. I saw that I, poor, wretched, and sinful J. N. D., knowing too much yet not enough about himself was left behind, and let go, but I was united to Christ in heaven. Then what was I waiting for?<sup>16</sup>

Darby wrote some 20 odd years after the event: "In my retreat [at the Pennefathers] the 32nd chapter of Isaiah taught me clearly, on God's behalf, that there was

<sup>13</sup> Francis William Newman, *Phases of Faith; or, Passages from the History of my Creed* (London: Chapman, 1850), 21.

<sup>14</sup> Bellett, John Gifford, *Interesting Reminiscences of the Early History of the "Brethren": With a Letter from J.G. Bellet to J.N. Darby* (London: Weston-Super-Mare, 1884), 3.

<sup>15</sup> Kelly, William, ed., *Bible Treasury*, 12:352. Had Bellett met up with Irving's views in London as formulated in his introduction to *The Coming of Messiah in Glory and Majesty?* Edward Irving (1792–1834) was a Church of Scotland minister who was called to London as a preacher in 1822, where he became something of a phenomenon and drew large crowds numbering in the thousands. His congregation expanded so swiftly that in 1827 a larger church had to be built. He was famous for his preaching on eschatology and on the revival of the miraculous gifts of the Holy Spirit as found in the early Church. Though not its founder his name is associated with the Catholic Apostolic Church formed in the 1830s.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

still an economy to come, of His ordering; a state of things in no way established as yet.”<sup>17</sup>

And 40 years after, in 1868, he wrote:

The coming of the Lord was the other truth which was brought to my mind from the Word, as that which, if sitting in heavenly places in Christ, was alone to be waited for, that I might sit in heavenly places with Him. Isaiah 32 brought me to the earthly consequences of the same truth, though other passages might seem perhaps more striking to me now; but I saw an evident change of dispensation in that chapter, when the Spirit would be poured out on the Jewish nation, and a king reign in righteousness.<sup>18</sup>

If Darby was in heavenly places and the only thing to wait for was Christ actually taking him there, what to do with a passage containing earthly promises? Darby arrived at the conclusion that there was a future for God’s ancient people of Israel, independent of the Christian one. As the above quotations were made long after Darby’s stay at his brother-in-law’s house it is perhaps understandable that Darby conflated several things in retrospect. On some points he did not have a clear opinion until several years afterwards, as his own statements and those of others suggest. Perhaps his statements about his coming to understand certain things during his convalesce should be understood in light of another comment he made: “It was a vague fact which received form in my mind long after.”

Darby wrote of seeing an evident change in dispensation, but when it came to defining dispensations in general, he was not as exact and clear as those before him had been and definitely not as detailed as those after him. Perhaps “The Apostasy of the Successive Dispensations”<sup>19</sup> offers one of the better summaries of his view, though it is by no means definitive. In it he identified five dispensations. Darby did not consider the state in paradise to be an actual dispensation.<sup>20</sup> Thus, in contrast to other schemes, he began with: (1) Noah (government),<sup>21</sup> followed by (2) Moses

<sup>17</sup> *Letters*, 3:298–299.

<sup>18</sup> *Letters*, 1:516.

<sup>19</sup> *CW*, 1:124–130. This paper is dated as being from 1836 in *Dates of J. N. Darby’s Collected Writings* (Surrey: Bible and Gospel Trust, 2019), 8.

<sup>20</sup> “But I am not aware that the first or Adamic state is ever called a dispensation, or οἰκονομία, or anything like it.” *CW*, 13:153.

<sup>21</sup> “Here dispensations, [with Noah] properly speaking, begin.” *CW*, 1:125. But Darby writes elsewhere of,

... the patriarchal dispensation, the original association of paradise, the judgment and the promise (not without intervening testimony), formed the basis of patriarchal faith: from this, even as Adam from his innocence, men declined, losing the power of testimony in lust. The very sons of

(obedience under the Law), then (3) Aaron (priesthood) and (4) kingly (up to Manasseh), leading up to the present (5) Spirit/Gentile dispensation.<sup>22</sup>

In *Collectanea* 6 under the heading “The Dispensations and the Remnant” Darby gives a concise statement as to what he understands a dispensation to be:

A dispensation is any arranged dealing of God in which man has been set before his fall, and having been tried, has failed, and therefore God has been obliged to act by other means.<sup>23</sup>

God became defiled, till the earth was corrupt before God, and filled with violence; and He said, I will destroy man whom I have made, from off the face of the earth. Then came the testimony—the deluge coming, and the ark of escape, and then the judgment testified of. Again, upon the introduction of idolatry, Abraham was called out to be, in his seed after the flesh, the source of another dispensation, as he was the father of the faithful, circumcised as well as not. *CW*, 2:95.

Moreover, Darby also placed Job in the pre-dispensation period: “the same in Job, before dispensations began.” *Notes and Jottings*, 8.

<sup>22</sup> Darby’s not so clearly defined scheme of dispensations may have been due to his dislike of going at things “systematically”: “I confess I find it more profitable to learn from Scripture, than to frame a system.” *CW*, 33:9. Though he writes repeatedly of dispensations he does not go into something like “dispensationalism.” Others had developed more clearly defined and consistent dispensationalist schemes, for example, the so-called “Albury Circle.” In 1826, the banker, Henry Drummond, MP (1786–1860), later co-founder of the Catholic Apostolic Church, who had begun to take an interest in Irving’s prophetic views, invited a number of men to his country house in Albury Park in Surrey, who were considered to be leading scholars in the field of biblical prophecy, to study the subject and determine how it related to their times. Among those attending was of course Edward Irving himself. In March of 1829, the resulting “Albury Circle” took over publishing *The Morning Watch*. Darby was acquainted with this quarterly, as can be seen from his referring to it in his published writings. In one of their issues they published the following arrangement of dispensations:

As he [God] created all things in six days, and rested on the seventh, hallowing it, so has he ordained in six successive ages to work out the work of all new creation, and added a seventh age as an eternal one, the age of rest and sanctified glory. These seven ages are, — 1. the age before the Fall, or Adam age; 2. the age until the Flood, or Noah age; 3. the age until the deliverance of the church, or Patriarchal age; 4. the age of the Jewish church 5. the age of the Gentile church, 6. the age of the Millennial church, and 7. the age of the Resurrection church.

See *The Morning Watch* or *Quarterly Journal on Prophecy and Theological Review* (September 1831): 134–135. Hereafter as *The Morning Watch*.

Though age is here used in the sense of dispensation Darby himself made a clear distinction between the terms, as we shall see. (He would also not lump everything together under the term “church” within these dispensations, as his understanding of it differed from others.) For more on *The Morning Watch* see Patterson, Mark Rayburn, “Designing the Last Days, Edward Irving, The Albury Circle, and the Theology of The Morning Watch” (PhD thesis, King’s College, London, 2001).

<sup>23</sup> J. N. Darby, “Collectanea: Being Some of the Subjects Considered at Leamington on 3rd June and Four Following Days in the Year 1839,” Stem Publishing, [http://www.stempublishing.com/authors/darby/New8\\_95/38Collectanea.html](http://www.stempublishing.com/authors/darby/New8_95/38Collectanea.html).

And the following makes clear why he did not consider the time before the flood to be a dispensation:

Before the proper dispensation of God, we get the world before the flood; not exactly a dispensation, but a body of men left, in a certain sense, to themselves. There was testimony, as in Enoch and Noah, but no dispensed order or system by which God acted as governing the earth. We find even in this, that God acts in the grace of His own character. Noah was a faithful witness [before the flood]; in him was the great principle [of faith], though this was not strictly a dispensation.<sup>24</sup>

In “The Apostasy of the Successive Dispensations,” he is more elaborate:

The detail of the history connected with these dispensations brings out many most interesting displays, both of the principles and patience of God’s dealings with the evil and failure of man; ...the dispensations themselves all declare some leading principle or interference of God, some condition in which He has placed man, principles which in themselves are everlastingly sanctioned of God, but in the course of those dispensations placed responsibly in the hands of man for the display and discovery of what he was, and the bringing in their infallible establishment in Him to whom the glory of them all rightly belonged. ... in every instance, there was total and immediate failure as regarded man, however the patience of God might tolerate and carry on by grace the dispensation in which man has thus failed in the outset; and further, that there is no instance of the restoration of a dispensation afforded us, though there might be partial revivals of it through faith.<sup>25</sup>

<sup>24</sup> Darby, “Collectanea.”

<sup>25</sup> *CW*, 1:124. Views on dispensations can greatly vary, but it is undeniable that there are differing stages, (however defined), in God’s dealing with humankind as presented in the Bible and that these stages succeed one another because the previous ones have failed in some way. This is not something artificially superimposed upon the biblical text, but easily recognizable as even studies not dealing directly with dispensations note. For example, Thomas L. Thompson, *The Bible in History* (London: Random House, 2000), 25, writes about the story of Israel in a way reminiscent of dispensationalist approaches:

This mainstream story of human ambition... is one focused on the competing wills of God and men. ... This chain-narrative which characterizes the story of Israel’s origins from Abraham onward is intrinsically marked as a story of supersession. The past is a scene of failure, ever to be overcome by a ‘new Israel’ that will finally follow God’s will for them. It is a story, not of biblical faith, but of human apostasy. Such a story demands a rejection of the past and a reorientation to a new future.

This aspect of failure or ruin and non-restoration in regard to dispensations was important to Darby<sup>26</sup> and for him it applied to the Church as well:

As to the ruin of the Church, the theory came for me after the consciousness of it, and even now, the theory is but a small thing to my mind; it is the burden one bears.<sup>27</sup>

Some years after the conversion of my soul I looked around to find where the Church was, but I could not find it. I could find plenty of saints better than myself, but not the Church as it was set up with power on the earth. Then I say the Church as thus set up is ruined, and I cannot find a better word for it.<sup>28</sup>

But it was not all bleak and depressing:

What I felt from the beginning, and began with, was this: the Holy Spirit remains, and therefore, the essential principle of unity with His presence for (the fact we are now concerned in) wherever two or three are gathered in My name, there I am in the midst of them. When this is really sought, there will certainly be blessing by His presence.<sup>29</sup>

### **The Relationship of the Church to Dispensations**

Though Darby spoke of the ruin of the Church and noted that all dispensations ended in ruin, he nevertheless made an important distinction: he did not view the Church as a dispensation. He effectively removed it from the list. The Church, in his opinion, was something quite unique not having existed before Pentecost. It was common in his day to consider all believers as being a part of God's Church, or to view the Church as the sum of all believers through time, be they Old or New Testament believers. Darby begged to differ. The Church, as the body and bride of Christ with its special relationship to the Father as revealed through him, never existed before the descent of the Holy Spirit which baptized all believers into one body, forming the temple in which he dwells. This unity through the Spirit was something

<sup>26</sup> "There is no instance of the renewal of a dispensation which had declined away and departed from its God, but a full and extraordinary testimony before the judgment came, in order to the gathering out the remnant before the judgments." *CW*, 2:96.

<sup>27</sup> *Letters*, 1:42

<sup>28</sup> *CW*, 32:400.

<sup>29</sup> *Letters*, 1:94.

totally new.<sup>30</sup> There was a people of God before Pentecost as there will be one after the rapture, but they are not part of the Church as Christ's body and bride. They do not stand in the same relationship to God the way the Church does.<sup>31</sup>

Thus, in Darby's mind, the Church did not form a dispensation, inasmuch as it did not belong to the earth.<sup>32</sup> Much rather, the Church was a parenthesis, an interruption, an interval:

Looked at as an earthly dispensation, it merely fills up, in detailed exercise of grace, the gap in the regular earthly order of God's counsels, . . . though making a most instructive parenthesis, it forms no part of the regular order of God's earthly plans, but is merely an interruption of them to give a fuller character and meaning to them.<sup>33</sup>

I know what a person means by "the dispensation of the kingdom of heaven," but we belong to a heavenly thing in an interval, and there are no dispensations in heaven. The kingdom of heaven is a dispensation, the dispensation of the gospel is an administration.<sup>34</sup>

<sup>30</sup> "By one Spirit we are all baptized into one Body, compare Ephesians 5 and 1 at the end; also the Church displays to the principalities and powers in the heavenlies a new thing." *Notes and Comments*, 1:134.

<sup>31</sup> "The Father loved the Son, and put all things into His hand, though a divine Person. Then all this was not a dispensation, but of real and absolute dealing in eternal life." *Notes and Comments*, 7:42. Darby's argument was that believers now know God through the revelation by the Son of the Father and are brought into that relationship which existed before any dispensations and is so outside of them all. One could also add the argument here from Ephesians 1:3–6 that Christians were chosen in Christ before the foundation of the world, in contrast to those connected with the kingdom and thus, the earth, chosen from the foundation of the world as in Matthew 25:34. This would really underscore the idea of Christians having nothing to do with the earth and its administration through dispensations. The argument would be that Christians are intimately connected with Christ who was also foreordained as the lamb before the foundation of the world (cf. 1 Peter 1:19–20).

<sup>32</sup> *CW*, 4:328.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 1:94.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 25:244. Darby clearly distinguished between the "kingdom of heaven" and the "Church." They are not identical, though they overlap. "The church is God's assembly, and, viewed in its heavenly place of association with Christ, it is the body of the Head. The kingdom is the sphere of government. The church is very distinct as God's house, the Spirit of God makes it His habitation; but it is the body of Christ, united to Him, the Head, in heaven; a wholly different thing. Government is the great thought in the kingdom; but grace is the thought in the church; that which God calls, that which He elects." *Notes and Jottings*, 14. Darby believed that the kingdom deals with responsibility and contains believers (confessors) and unbelievers (professors) as seen in Christ's parables. The kingdom is that sphere where Christ is (if only outwardly) acknowledged as Lord. The Church (i.e. the body in which the Spirit dwells, the bride of Christ) consists only of believers. Not everyone in the kingdom is in the Church, but every believer in the Church is also in the kingdom. In Darby's view water baptism brought

But if the Church was not a dispensation, how then could it be ruined? “But there is an order of things connected with it [the Church] during its sojourning here below—an order of things whose existence is linked with the Church’s responsibility.”<sup>35</sup>

This “order of things” is that which is linked with Darby’s comments on the ruin of the Church and has to do with its “house” character mentioned above.<sup>36</sup> “The Church, as responsible on earth, is in ruins; its organizations, for they are many, are not God’s.... The external church is in ruins, cut up into a hundred sects, or gorged with error and evil in popery.”<sup>37</sup>

Darby is occasionally confusing as he does write of the Church as a dispensation at times,<sup>38</sup> but when doing so he is viewing it from a different aspect, namely, as that which carries the name in the world without differentiating between true confessors and mere professors. That is what can and has, in his opinion, fallen into ruin. In such instances he is using the term in a general, conventional sense as can be seen in his use of “viewed as” in “When the church, viewed as a dispensation on earth, has come to an end”<sup>39</sup> or “position” in “The church’s portion is heavenly... but, as intrusted to man’s responsible service on earth, the church stands in the position of a

one into the kingdom here on earth, the sphere of responsibility (as see the servants in the Gospel parables). This overlaps with professing Christendom as it entails outward profession of Christ as Lord. Becoming a part of the Church, i.e. the body and bride of Christ, was only through true faith and the resulting baptism of the Holy Spirit. See Darby, “The Public Ruin of the Church,” *CW*, 32:392–407.

<sup>35</sup> *CW*, 4:328.

<sup>36</sup> Expressed in a very simplified form: the “house” character of the Church has to do with administration and responsibility—that which can be evaluated and judged—whereas the body and bride aspects reflect privilege and relationship in Darby’s thought. The house aspect also explains how there can be a mixture of “good and bad” within Christianity: “But in a great house there are not only vessels of gold and of silver, but also of wood and of earth; and some to honour, and some to dishonour” (2 Tim 2:20). When compared to the kingdom this “house” character seems to have many parallels regarding responsibility, yet Darby distinguished the two spheres. *Notes and Jottings*, 15: “Ques. The kingdom of heaven and the great house, are they coextensive now? Could they be applied to the same sphere? They are distinct thoughts. The great house is a comparison drawn from the ruin of that which professes to be the church of God; all kinds of corruption and wickedness have been brought in where God’s Spirit is, where God dwells.”

<sup>37</sup> *CW*, 14:275, 291. There would be no restoration to former power with, among other things, apostles and elders. See *Notes and Jottings*, 289. This in marked contrast, e.g., to the views of the Catholic Apostolic Church.

<sup>38</sup> “Till the church, as a dispensation, is spued out of Christ’s mouth.” *CW*, 2:175. Cf. “The church, as a dispensation, had ceased to be in a suffering state.” *Ibid.*, 2:188.

<sup>39</sup> *CW*, 5:14. Emphasis added.

dispensation: to be rejected and cast off, if it does not maintain its faithfulness and manifest the glory intrusted [sic] to it.”<sup>40</sup>

If not understood, this distinction can lead to confusion at times. The editor of Darby’s paper “Evidence from Scripture of the Passing Away of the Present Dispensation” saw it necessary to add the following footnote to Darby’s statement regarding the Church’s failure in maintaining its position: “‘Church’ refers here merely to professing Christendom.”<sup>41</sup> As well as “That is, an outward system in the world,” qualifying Darby’s remark that the “church would become corrupt” in connection with the parable of the tares.<sup>42</sup>

As noted above, Darby ends his list of dispensations with a vague Spirit/Gentile one, by which the period during which the Holy Spirit is here on earth<sup>43</sup> and Israel has been set aside and no longer plays a dominant role is meant. In other writings Darby clearly speaks of a present dispensation and one yet to come.<sup>44</sup> For example, when asked if this present dispensation (which would be the “Spirit/Gentile” one in his list) is the last he replied “there is yet a dispensation to come, in which the things prophesied of by the prophets will come, and for which those who have received the truth wait; and this [present] dispensation is not it.”<sup>45</sup> The coming dispensation is the millennium, which will not be characterized by anything Gentile, but rather Jewish when Jerusalem shall be the center and all nations come to it for instruction as in Isaiah 2:2–3 and Micah 4:1–2.

But there is a dispensation, when the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the glory of the Lord as the waters cover the sea. This is therefore not the last, for the effects stated of that are not contemplated in the instructions of this. This is a dispensation of testimony and of instruction; that, of universal knowledge, and therefore essentially different, for men shall no more say, “Know the Lord.”<sup>46</sup>

<sup>40</sup> *CW*, 3:316.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 2:93.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 2:95.

<sup>43</sup> See *Notes and Jottings*, 445: “Ques. Would you say that the dispensation of the present time is that of the power of the Spirit of God? Yes, that is what it is.”

<sup>44</sup> “The present dispensation is a dispensation of faith.” *CW*, 5:4.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 2:91.

<sup>46</sup> *CW*, 2:91.

The dispensation of the new covenant is, properly speaking, the millennium on the earth, as it is easy to be convinced of by reading the prophecy of Jeremiah who speaks of it.<sup>47</sup>

So, Darby actually envisioned *six* dispensations if we add this Jewish dispensation (the millennium) to his list. The present dispensation does not end with the rapture (to which we come shortly), but with the appearing of Christ after the tribulation. The following millennium, though a time of great blessing, will also end in ruin, resulting in judgment. The ensuing eternal state, as the state in paradise before the Fall, is in Darby's view not a dispensation. Old Testament prophetic texts do not extend beyond the millennium:

The post-millennial state, which cannot properly be called a dispensation, for it is eternity.<sup>48</sup>

The full result will only be in the new heavens and new earth, the eternal state of blessedness, a condition of happiness not dependent on fulfilling the responsibility in which he who enjoyed it was placed and in which he failed, but based on a finished work accomplished to the glory of God in the very place of ruin.<sup>49</sup>

“Fulfilling the responsibility in which he who enjoyed it was placed and in which he failed” is Darby's view of what properly defines or characterizes a dispensation. The following quotation would also seem to suggest that at times Darby considered there to be more than five dispensations, but be that as it may, the Church, is nevertheless, not a part of it:

It is like all the various ways and dealings of God with men: [1] sinless man at first, [2] the promises, [3] the law, [4] the priesthood, [5] the Jewish royalty in obedience with the law, [6] Gentile supremacy without any, have respectively been trusted to men; man has failed in them all. All will be set up in grace, in or under Christ. The last Adam will be there (of which the first was but an image), the promises fulfilled, the law written in the heart, priesthood in its excellency made good, Jewish royalty in the Son of David, supremacy over the Gentiles, in Him who shall rise to reign over them. The church—though forming no part of this series of dealings, yet, as the sphere of the manifestation of Christ's heavenly glory, by man's faithfulness on the earth, as the house of God, through the

<sup>47</sup> *CW*, 4:328.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 5:222.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 29:247.

Spirit—is subject to the same divine law, first of responsibility in man, failure, and divine accomplishment in grace and power.<sup>50</sup>

What can further add to the confusion is when the terms “age” and “dispensation” are used interchangeably. Darby, however, did not view them as synonymous. As he was prone to do, Darby distinguished between the two terms.

### **Distinguishing between Dispensations and Ages**

In Darby’s view, an age was more properly understood as a period of time whereas a dispensation could be characterized as an administration which necessarily involved trial or testing and ultimately ends in failure. While the two can overlap as to time, they are not identical as to character. It can therefore be quite misleading when others use the term “ages” in the sense of “dispensations”—as many have. In Darby’s usage they do not mean one and the same thing, and thus must be distinguished.

Prior to Darby, many divided the history of God’s dealings with humanity into ages. One example we have already noticed in footnote 22 and there is one in Darby’s review of Dr. Marcus Dods’ (1834–1909), a minister of the Free Church of Scotland, sermon “Inspiration and Revelation” in 1877 in which he comments on Georg Heinrich August Ewald’s (1803–1875, German theologian and Biblical exegete) “The Book of Origins”<sup>51</sup> as follows: “But then he goes back to the origin of the various heads of the four ages, Mosaic, Patriarchal, Noachic, and Adamic: so it is a book of origins.”<sup>52</sup>

These four ages are certainly familiar to all who are acquainted with the various dispensational models that exist, but Darby did not consider ages and dispensations to be identical. Taking Christ’s words from Matthew 12:32 where he speaks of “this age” and “the age to come” Darby saw only two ages in the strict sense:

We are still in the age which existed before the coming of Christ—an age which began with Noah. But we must notice the two principal phases of it: Moses and Sinai, the time of separation from the age for Israel; and Nebuchadnezzar in

<sup>50</sup> *CW*, 30:316.

<sup>51</sup> In Ewald’s opinion, this was the basic source for the *hexateuch*, viz. the 5 books of Moses and Joshua known as “P” or the priestly source in the composition of the Torah according to the documentary hypothesis.

<sup>52</sup> *CW*, 29:155.

whom God entrusted the power to the Gentiles when He declared His people Lo-Ammi; “not my people.”<sup>53</sup>

Here it is interesting to note that for Darby “this age” and the dispensations both begin with Noah. “This age” continues on until Christ’s return in glory (after the tribulation period) and the millennium that follows is “the age to come”:

In the same way the end of this world (in Matthew 13 and other places) is not of this globe when it is consumed, but of this age or dispensation; a perfectly well-known phrase among the Jews who spoke of the *olam-hazeh*, this world or age, and the *olam-havo*, the age to come, the latter being the time of Messiah’s reign.<sup>54</sup>

As with dispensations so also with ages: the Church is not a part of it:

Christianity is not properly an age at all. “This age” belongs to this world, not to the church.<sup>55</sup>

As to the expression “this age,” we are accustomed to apply it to the church; but it is not here a question of the church, but of the introduction of the kingdom of heaven, Messiah being rejected by the Jews. What was the age in which the Lord was found with His disciples? Was it the church, or the dispensation of the church? By no means. It was a certain age of this world, which was to end by the reception of the Messiah, and the re-establishment of the law as a rule by the government of this Messiah. The people of Israel having rejected Him, this age becomes purely and simply this present evil world (age), from which Christ delivers us, but in the course of which God has set up His kingdom, in the way we have just spoken of.<sup>56</sup>

Darby also warns of confusing the two:

A very serious consequence is connected with this, that Christianity, or the church dispensation, is treated as an age, and the new age as beginning when it ends.<sup>57</sup>

In the discussion on Darby’s contribution to dispensationalist thought, the important thing is not how he divided God’s dealings with humanity up into

<sup>53</sup> *CW*, 28:5.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 10:360.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 8:14.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 24:12.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 8:13.

dispensations—and we have seen that at times it can be difficult to pinpoint him—but rather his understanding of how the Church fits or did not fit into it. That was revolutionary.

In Darby's view, "The Church, a lowly heavenly body, has no portion on earth at all, as it was at the beginning—suffering as its Head did, unknown and well known—an unearthly witness of heavenly things on earth."<sup>58</sup> Darby believed that soon after the death of the apostles, believers began to wrongly take Old Testament prophecies and promises and apply them to themselves. He felt that they had rightly seen that God had put his earthly people (Israel) aside, and that they, the Christian company (one new man in Christ, out of Jews and Gentiles, Ephesians 2:15) were now the "people of God," but he concluded that some made the mistake of thinking that Israel would no longer have a future as Israel at all. If so, what was to be done with Old Testament promises and (in part) unfulfilled prophecies? Many thought they must now symbolically or spiritually apply to the Church. Darby strongly disagreed, stating that it is "impossible to spiritualise it away to other meanings."<sup>59</sup>

### The New Covenant and the Two Peoples of God

Darby differed from others in that he saw the new covenant (see e.g. Jer 31:31–34) as connected with the millennium, but not with the Church: "The first covenant, then, was a covenant made with Israel; the second covenant is a covenant made with Israel, but not yet accomplished in its effects."<sup>60</sup> No connection with the new covenant for Christians? Yes, but not in the way imagined by most at the time. "There is really no difficulty. Those of the Jews, and we of the Gentiles, who now believe in Jesus, come into a distinct position as one body, but possessing all the moral blessings of the new covenant. The fulfilment of it pertains to the Jewish people in the last days, when Messiah reigns over them."<sup>61</sup> The Church enjoys its "moral blessings" now. The Church, as Christ's body and bride, does not stand in a covenant (legal) relationship with God.<sup>62</sup>

<sup>58</sup> *CW*, 18:156.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 2:115.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 3:49.

<sup>61</sup> *Letters*, 3:324.

<sup>62</sup> "The gospel is not a covenant, but the revelation of the salvation of God. It proclaims the great salvation. We enjoy indeed all the essential privileges of the new covenant, its foundation being laid on God's part in the blood of Christ, but we do so in spirit, not according to the letter. The new covenant will be established formally with Israel in the millennium. Meanwhile the old covenant is judged by the fact that there is a new one." From Darby's *Synopsis*, "Hebrews Chapter 8," available in many editions in print and online.

Many Christians in Darby's time expected Christ to come and set up His millennial kingdom. They thought that a certain number of events, those described in the prophetic books of the Bible, would have to take place first, among them a period of tribulation (Matt 24:21, Rev 7:14). They deduced from biblical texts that a people, a remnant, would have to pass through this tribulation and face the antichrist<sup>63</sup> before entering the kingdom. They, as Christians, thought *themselves* to be this people. Darby saw the consequences of this view as follows:

In denying a distinct Jewish remnant, having Jewish faith, Jewish hopes, and resting on Jewish promises during the tribulation it reduces the Church to the level of these [by putting the Church in the position of the Jewish remnant] and the value and power of spiritual blessings in heavenly places in Christ, and the place of Christ's body in union with Him, is denied and lost.<sup>64</sup>

Darby was fully convinced that the Old Testament deals with, and is for, an earthly people. His thought was that prophecy always deals with the earth. The Church, in his opinion, is never mentioned in the Old Testament, and was never an object of prophecy, being heavenly in nature. It was the mystery hidden in God and came into existence at Pentecost when believers were baptized into one body through the Holy Spirit (see Rom 16:25; 1 Cor 2:7–10; Eph 3:2–11, 5:32; Col 1:25–27, 2:2–3). The fact that now, after the teaching of the New Testament, one can see the Church in types, or the fact that the Old Testament is for the Christian in the sense of Romans 15:4 and 1 Cor 10:6, 11, is something else.<sup>65</sup> He states:

Besides the creation, of which He is the Head, in which we may comprise angels, there are three great spheres in which Christ's glory is displayed - the church, the Jews, and the Gentiles. The church, properly speaking, is not the subject of prophecy. As to Old Testament prophecy, the New declares in the

<sup>63</sup> Contrary to many of his time Darby did not view the Pope as the "antichrist": ... "but the pope's being Antichrist; which for my part, however anti-Christian he may be, I do not believe." *CW*, 18:184. Darby writes elsewhere:

All who look for a personal Antichrist have been accustomed to assume that he is the head of the Roman empire, in whose hand imperial power will be and the throne of the world. Of this I much doubt. ... What I question is the civil head of empire being Antichrist, which seems to me to have a much more religious character—a consideration which has much importance in the study of Scripture. *CW*, 5:215, 223.

<sup>64</sup> *CW*, 11:185.

<sup>65</sup> "The whole doctrine of the body of Christ, and even its existence, was a hidden mystery, revealed now to apostles and prophets, and manifested now to angels. (Eph 3.) Many truths, which render its reception easy to a Jew, were revealed in the prophets, but never the mystery itself. Some types perhaps can now be understood, but revealed nothing then." *CW*, 13:163.

most absolute and positive manner that it was a mystery hidden in all ages, and now revealed to the apostles and prophets by the Spirit. The church belongs to heaven, is the body of Christ seated there, and while He is so seated. Prophecy relates to earth. The church is viewed, it is true, when it takes part in the government of the earth for that reason; and the marriage of the Lamb and the description of the heavenly Jerusalem give the epoch from which dates the character of this relationship with earth.<sup>66</sup>

Darby's understanding was that, as the Church took up Jewish hopes (a glorious place/future here on earth) and practices (priesthood/clergy and rituals) it lost its true hope and sense of character/being, which are heavenly and substituted them for earthly ones. The apostles had taught the saints to expect the Lord's soon coming to take them to be with himself (1 Thess 1:10). But that which the Lord spoke of in Matthew 25:1–13 soon took place: true believers and mere professors "fell asleep" as regards this hope.

Darby distinguished between two peoples of God, the earthly and the heavenly, with two different destinies<sup>67</sup> and approached Scripture from that perspective. There were sections which dealt with or were meant for the earthly people (Israel) and others for the heavenly company (the Church). It was not as simple as Jews=Old Testament and Christians=New Testament. In Darby's view very many New Testament passages, especially in the Gospels, were meant for the future Jewish remnant. Though there is no known instance of Darby himself explicitly using Paul's words to Timothy about "rightly dividing the word of truth" (2 Tim 2:15) in the way it has become popular today,<sup>68</sup> they neatly sum up the principle behind this new approach to the study of Scripture.

The Church are members of His body, of His flesh, and of His bones, which is never true of the Jewish people, though, in a general sense, married to Jehovah. It is not a real union, as the union of the Church with the risen Jesus. This is God's act and work, the plan of His new Creation as of His old.<sup>69</sup>

<sup>66</sup> *CW*, 11:45.

<sup>67</sup> Darby was not the first to make the distinction. Edward Irving, in his foreword to Manuel de Lacunza's, "Coming of Messiah in Glory and Majesty," 1827, *Birthpangs*, 1:7, 64, and 65, <http://www.birthpangs.org/articles/prophetic/lacunza-intro.html>, had already done so.

<sup>68</sup> As for example Cyrus Ingerson Scofield's pamphlet by that title first published in 1888 and still available in numerous editions today. Darby comes close to it when he writes: "It is only through the Holy Ghost enabling us to compare aright scripture with scripture, that we can discern what concerns a Jewish remnant of old or by and by, and that which describes or supposes our [Christian] position." *CW*, 11:179.

<sup>69</sup> *Notes and Comments*, 5:307.

But how could a distinct Jewish remnant co-exist with the Church? That was a problem for Christians who saw and hoped for a future restoration of Israel. Here is just one example taken from the article “Doddridge on the Restoration of the Jews” printed in the March issue of *The Morning Watch* in 1829:

How far the form of government and religion among the Jews may, upon their restoration to their own land, be changed from what it originally was, we cannot certainly say; but it is exceedingly probable that so much of their ancient law will continue in force as can be reconciled with the genius and force of the Christian religion.

70

Darby viewed things differently:

Are we under the Jewish dispensation? Is it not true that God has substituted the Christian dispensation for the Jewish economy, or the dispensation of the law? Everyone knows that. And he who would now pretend to re-establish the Jewish dispensation would be guilty of sin.<sup>71</sup>

The Jews had a “this world” and “a world to come,” “this age” and an “age to come.” Messiah was to bring in the “age to come.” The age of the law went on and Messiah did come, but they would not have Him, and the whole thing stopped; then comes the church between that and His second coming; and this is why I said this is not strictly a dispensation, but when Messiah comes again, it will close this time, and then will be the last day of this age.

The times of the Gentiles in Daniel, and the parenthesis of the church, are not at all contemporaneous; for the times of the Gentiles began in Babylon, being the times of the four Gentiles beasts in Daniel. The times of the Gentiles will not end at the same time with the church, but go on a little after we are caught up.<sup>72</sup>

This is a significant expression: “a little after we are caught up.” With it, Darby solved the problem of the co-existence of two peoples of God—the one earthly with earthly promises (Israel) and the other heavenly with heavenly promises (the Church)—by removing the one so that the other could develop—the rapture.<sup>73</sup> The

<sup>70</sup> *The Morning Watch*, March 1829, 74.

<sup>71</sup> *CW*, 4:272.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, 25:243–244.

<sup>73</sup> Others had written of a rapture before Darby. For example: Francisco Ribera (1537–1591) saw it taking place 45 days before the end of the tribulation. Lacunza saw a time gap between the rapture and the appearing of Christ. The Dominican monk Bernard Lambert (1738–1813) viewed Christ’s return in two phases involving one in which he first comes to take his own to himself. He published his 1806 *Exposition des Prédications et Promesses, Faites à L’église pour les Derniers Temps de la Gentilité* (“Expositions of the Predictions and Promises Made to the Church for the Last Days of the Gentiles”)

Church was in Darby's thought the parenthesis which fit in between the sixty-ninth and seventieth week of Daniel. The first sixty-nine weeks dealt with earthly concerns and were to be viewed as literal and ended with the beginning of Acts. The seventieth week dealt with earthly realities after the rapture.<sup>74</sup> The people of Israel did have a future, texts as found in Isaiah 32 would be literally fulfilled, and God would begin dealing with them again once the true Church was no longer on the earth.<sup>75</sup> (The apostate Church, Christian in name only, would remain to be judged.) The beast—the revived Roman empire and antichrist—would appear, the tribulation take place, at the end of which Christ would return with those he had previously raptured to exercise judgment (ending this age) and set up the millennium kingdom on earth with its center in Jerusalem.

What is interesting is that this idea of removal was in accord with Jewish thinking, if from a different angle. The Jews had viewed the capture of Constantinople in 1453 as a harbinger of their salvation. This defeat of Christians by Islam made them hope that Judaism—the true religion—would now prevail.<sup>76</sup> In their view Christianity had to be eliminated before the Jews could triumph. Only when the Church is no more can Israel become great. Basically, that is how Darby came to view things. The Lord comes to remove his Church from the earth and then takes up relations with

in 1806. For Lambert's possible influence on Darby see Timothy C.F. Stunt, *The Elusive Quest of the Spiritual Malcontent* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2015), 138–140. Morgan Edwards (1722–1795) in his *Two Academical Exercises on Subjects Bearing the Following Titles; Millennium, Last-Novelties* (Philadelphia: Dobson and Lang, 1788), 24, viewed believers being raptured out of the tribulation 3 ½ years before the millennium: "The last event, and the event that will usher in the millennium, will be, the coming of Christ from paradise to earth, with all the saints he had taken up thither (about three years and a half before." Through family connections on his mother's side of the family Darby may have known of this paper. William George Lambert (1805–1866), *A Call to the Converted* (Oxford: J. L. Wheeler, 1831), 62–63: "At the time our Lord comes into the air to receive his saints, a time quite distinct from his coming down to the Jews on the earth." The way things are formulated gives one the impression that this thought and been in circulation for some time. (Of interest is that in the abridged edition of 1837, pages 58 to 66 containing the above statement and others referring to the Lord's coming, are missing.)

<sup>74</sup> Darby: "But in the [book of] Revelation we get back to earthly government. In the historical part of the book we have the last half-week of Daniel. Messiah has been cut off, and there remains a half-week that is not fulfilled at all, and then the government of the heavenly saints comes in." *Notes and Jottings*, 300.

<sup>75</sup> In Darby's view the Church, the body of Christ, would be kept from the tribulation whereas the Jewish remnant would be preserved through it. "The Jewish remnant who escape the great trouble of the latter day (Jer. 30:7), will be the seed or nucleus of the future nation and their city, Jerusalem, the metropolis of the world." *CW*, 5:121.

<sup>76</sup> Arie Morgenstern, "Dispersion and the Longing for Zion 1240–1840," *Azure: Ideas for the Jewish Nation*, no. 12 (Winter 2002): 85–86, AzureOnline, <http://www.azure.org.il/article.php?id=264>.

Israel once again, relations which had been interrupted through the Church and Christianity. Had Darby been influenced by reading Jewish works?

At this point a digression is in order to briefly consider the question of possible sources, since it is the opinion of this author that the Jewish element has been somewhat neglected in studies dealing with dispensationalism. Christians were not the only ones who developed dispensationalist schemes, the Jews/Rabbis did as well.<sup>77</sup> One helpful item in the search for possible influences forming Darby's views is the catalog of his books, which were auctioned after his death.<sup>78</sup> One problem here is that not all volumes he possessed are listed and others simply as "in a box" or as "others" with no titles given. Another is the problem of dates—we do not know when Darby obtained a particular volume. Was it before or after his views on prophecy became clearly defined? Nevertheless, the catalog of titles, incomplete as it may be, does give us an indication of what he was occupied with. One can hardly imagine Darby purchasing a book just for the sake of having it. The list contains at least two titles which are of interest when it comes to questions of Jewish expectations. First, the works of John Lightfoot (1602–1675) in 13 volumes (1825), which include his *Horae Hebraicae et Talmudicae* and secondly Johann Christian Schöttgen's (1687–1751) two-volume *Horae Hebraicae et Talmudicae* (1733). Nathanael Riemer writes in "Der Rabbiner' - eine vergessene Zeitschrift eines christlichen Hebraisten" ("The Rabbi' - A Forgotten Journal of a Christian Hebraist"):

The first volume of Schöttgen's voluminous theological masterpiece "Horae Hebraicae et Talmudicae in Universe Novum Testamentum" is intended as a supplement and continuation of the work of the same name and incomplete by John Lightfoot (1602–1675). For a better understanding of Christianity, both authors attempted to explain the books of the Christian Testament verse by verse with commentaries from Jewish literature.<sup>79</sup>

<sup>77</sup> Morgenstern, 76–78, and 105–106. See also, Max S. Weremchuk, *Haben wir die Endzeit verpasst?* (Norderstedt: St. Alcuin of York Anglican Publishers, 2015), 201, 203–223.

<sup>78</sup> Items 204 and 357 respectively in J. N. Darby, and Sotheby, Wilkinson & Hodge (Firm), *Catalogue of the Library of the Late J.N. Darby, Esq., ... which will be sold by Auction* (London: J. Davy & Sons, 1889). The auction was held on Monday, 25th of November, 1889, and following Day.

<sup>79</sup> Nathanael Riemer, "Der Rabbiner' - eine Vergessene Zeitschrift eines Christlichen Hebraisten," *PaRDeS, Zeitschrift der Vereinigung für jüdische Studien e.V.* (2005), 11:39–40: "Der erste Band von Schöttgens voluminösem theologischen Hauptwerk "Horae Hebraicae et Talmudicae in universum Novum Testamentum" ist als Ergänzung und Fortsetzung des gleichnamigen und unvollständig gebliebenen Werkes von John Lightfoot (1602–1675) gedacht. Beide Autoren unternahmen für das bessere Verständnis des Christentums den Versuch, die Bücher des Christlichen Testamentes Vers für Vers mit Kommentaren aus der jüdischen Literatur zu erklären."

Darby's understanding of the rapture went hand in hand with his views on the distinction between Israel and the Church when it came to reading Scripture:

To see the coming of the Lord Jesus for the church changes the character of a thousand scriptures. Take the Psalms for instance—those which speak about judgments on the ungodly, such as 'the righteous washing their feet in the blood of the wicked.' We are not the persons who say this. It is the language of Jews, and of godly Jews too, who will be delivered through the rod of power smiting their enemies, when all the tribes of the earth will wail because of Him. But do I want my enemies to be destroyed to get to Christ? Certainly not.<sup>80</sup>

In Darby's view the apostle Paul was the only writer in the New Testament who spoke of the Church; he was the one whom the Lord used to make known the truth of the "mystery" (Eph 3:9), and he alone spoke of the rapture. When other New Testament writers spoke of the Lord's coming they spoke of his coming in judgment (except for John 14:3), that is, His "appearing" visible for all, at the end of the tribulation period, and to establish his kingdom here on earth.<sup>81</sup> Whenever they (or Paul) referred to the appearing, they always connected it somehow with responsibility and reward, since the Christian will first receive his/her reward in connection with the kingdom. However, when Paul spoke of the rapture, there were no conditional clauses, for all is grace. "You never find the 'assembly' [Church] nor the rapture, except in Paul (the mere name is used in 2 John). Others speak of His appearing, but that has to do with the government of this world."<sup>82</sup>

## The Pre-Tribulational Doctrine of Imminence in Darby's Thought

Christ's coming for his own Darby viewed as always presented as occurring without other events having to take place first: "At, and from the very beginning, the Lord's coming was presented as the immediate expectation and hope of the believer;

<sup>80</sup> *CW*, 5:322.

<sup>81</sup> "Now, as regards the world, this manifestation for judgment is Christ's coming. The term coming, or presence, embraces all that passes in connection with His return from the moment of His entrance into the created universe, be it heaven or earth. As regards the world, His coming may be called His appearing, His manifestation, the appearing of His coming, or His revelation. It has all these titles. The saints joining Christ is never referred to anything but His coming; for when He appears, they appear with Him." *CW*, 11:186.

<sup>82</sup> *Notes and Jottings*, 86 (cf. 335). "Now, none but Paul ever speaks of the church save the Lord Himself prophetically (Matt. 16, 18), or the historical facts that He added to it, etc., in the Acts." *CW*, 11:186.

while in no case is the thought of the coming of Christ put beyond the life of those who were living then.”<sup>83</sup>

Darby, and the Brethren after him, felt this clearly portrayed in the Gospel parable of the servants and in the parable of the wise and foolish virgins. Those servants entrusted with something were the same ones who awoke. The good seed sown in Matthew 13:24 was the seed from which the harvest came—one harvest, not many harvests. Even those passages that have a future fulfillment in no way delayed the hope of the Lord’s coming for His own.

The seven churches in Revelation 2 and 3 were viewed as giving a prophetic history of the church.<sup>84</sup> Had the believers of John’s day been told that the seven letters to the churches were a prophetic map and a literal history of the Church, they would have ceased to wait for Christ’s soon coming. But the seven churches as described all existed at the time, so this hope was apparently not hindered in any way. “The history of the Church is not given as a thing that is to continue, but it is all brought out in churches that then existed.”<sup>85</sup>

The longer the church remained on the earth, the meaning of these letters would become more and more obvious. Points not seen before would become clear. Nothing was written that would hinder the hope of Christ’s coming, but with the delay, the promise would be better understood. Coming evils did not dim the hope of the Lord’s coming either. When Paul spoke of “the last days” in 2 Timothy 3, some of the conditions he described already existed, and from these evils one was to “turn away.” When John spoke of the antichrist he said, “Even now are there many antichrists; whereby we know that it is the last time” (1 John 2:18). These evils were described as already present in the letters of the apostles.

Just as Darby felt that the Church had lost its true hope (the Lord coming for it in the rapture) by applying Jewish promises, that is, the prophesied future of Israel, to itself, so it also took up the Jewish belief in a general resurrection. This would be a day in which the good and wicked dead would all be raised at the same time—the wicked to go into everlasting destruction, and the good into everlasting bliss. We see this belief expressed in Martha’s words to Christ in John 11:24: “I know that he [Lazarus] shall rise again in the resurrection at the last day.”

The disciples did not understand Christ when He spoke of His own resurrection as being “from among the dead” (Mark 9:9–10). Darby stressed that the disciples

<sup>83</sup> *CW*, 11:186

<sup>84</sup> This was not considered to clash with the church being heavenly in nature and calling and thus not a subject of prophecy. The chapters in Revelation dealt with a testimony on earth, and its development as connected with man’s responsibility, and not with the true nature of the Church as such.

<sup>85</sup> *CW*, 11:86.

were not surprised that their Lord expected to die, but were puzzled by the *phrase* he used. A resurrection “from among the dead” is one in which only a few, not all, are raised and the rest remain where they are. Darby saw in this a sign of God’s special favor and his acceptance of those thus raised. The resurrection is a central theme in the Acts of the Apostles, and there the apostles spoke of it as “from among the dead” as exemplified in Christ Himself (Acts 4:2).<sup>86</sup>

The resurrection of the saints is like Christ’s resurrection—out from amongst the dead. When the Lord told the disciples not to speak of what they had seen until He was risen from among the dead, they began discussing what that meant. Martha, too, says, “I know that he shall rise again in the resurrection at the last day.” But the phrase “from among” was a new thing to them.<sup>87</sup>

The thought of our resurrection being like the Lord’s was seen in Romans 6:5: “If we have been planted together in the likeness of his death, we shall be also in the likeness of his resurrection.” The saints who have died shall also be raised “from among the dead.” The Thessalonians were new converts and young in the faith and had been taught to look for the Lord’s coming at any moment; they were perplexed about those of their number who had died in the meantime.

Meanwhile, He [Christ] has gone to prepare a place for us, and He says that He will come again and receive us unto Himself. When it is a question of those who have fallen asleep in Christ, you see another thing. The Thessalonians had got hold of the idea so fully, and were so looking for Christ’s coming, that if a person fell asleep, they thought he would not be there to meet Christ at His coming; and that was a grand mistake. Paul would not have them to be ignorant about it; he comforts them with this, that God would bring such with Jesus. Darby commented: “If we believe that Jesus died and rose again, such also that die will rise again; and when the Lord comes in glory, God will bring them with Him.”<sup>88</sup>

The passage of Scripture from which Darby depended most here is 1 Thessalonians 4:13–17. In it, the apostle Paul stressed that the departed saints would not miss out on anything. Christ would come, and the ones who had fallen asleep would be raised from the dead; after that the living would be changed—all occurring in the twinkling of an eye, according to 1 Corinthians 15:52. Both would be caught up together to meet the Lord in the air and they would be forever with the Lord. Then the Lord, according to Darby’s view, would resume his dealings here on earth with His

<sup>86</sup> Space does not permit quoting from it here, but it is interesting to note that in same issue mentioned above there is an article entitled “The First Resurrection,” *The Morning Watch* (March 1829): 62–71, which argues along these exact same lines of “from out of dead ones” in contrast to simply “from the dead.”

<sup>87</sup> *Notes and Jottings, 197.*

<sup>88</sup> *Notes and Jottings, 195.*

ancient people and the tribulation would take place. After the tribulation the Lord would visibly return from Heaven in glory to execute judgment and set up his kingdom. Upon His return He would bring His own with Him, those whom He had called up before (1 Thess 4:14).<sup>89</sup>

Seen in this way, the Lord's coming for his own required no events to occur beforehand; it was, to use Darby's phrase, an "any moment" expectation.<sup>90</sup> As far as this author is aware, Darby was the first to use this phrase, which has since then become so common in connection with the rapture. Though there is mention of Christ's coming being "immediate," none before Darby seem to have used the phrase "any moment."<sup>91</sup>

Before Christ returns to exercise judgment (at the end of the tribulation period), there will be signs and events that will point to his soon coming. The Old Testament is full of warnings of this coming judgment for those on earth, which is called the day of the Lord (cf. Isa 2:12–22). What caused Paul to write his second letter to the Thessalonians was their erroneous belief, influenced by false reports and the trials they were going through, that the day of the Lord had come. But before the Lord would come in judgment, the man of sin had to be revealed first, who is the anti-christ; and he could not come until the Church and the Holy Spirit who dwells in it were removed from the earth (2 Thess 2:6–7). Christ's bride, the Church, would clearly not go through the tribulation (cf. 1 Thess 5:9; Rev 3:10).<sup>92</sup>

<sup>89</sup> See Darby's, "Divine Mercy in the Church and towards Israel," *CW*(1838), 2:122–163; and "The Purpose of God," *CW*(ca. 1839), 2:266–277.

<sup>90</sup> See, for example, *Notes and Jottings*, 84 and 390.

<sup>91</sup> I'd like to thank Neil Dickson who first drew my attention to this fact. After sifting through Irving's writings and sermons, Lacunza's work and all the issues of the *The Morning Watch*, as well as other works from the same period, I must agree with Dickson.

<sup>92</sup> In multiple places, Darby commented on the church not being present during the future tribulation period: "That the evil of the last days is great is a thing I do not doubt. That the saints are in the tribulation I do not believe. Those who kept the word of Christ's patience will be kept out of the hour of trial which is about to come upon the whole habitable world, 'to try them that dwell upon the earth.'" *CW*, 11:91. "That is, when the church is addressed, it is with a declaration that she will be kept from that hour which shall come to try others. So that thus far the testimonies of Scripture declare that the unequalled tribulation is for Jacob, and that, when the time of temptation is spoken of in addressing the church, it is to declare that the faithful shall be kept out of it." *CW*, 11:111. "As regards passing through the tribulation (a question which everyone knows is that which always arises on this matter) the scripture seems to me to make it very simple. How can I tell there will be a tribulation? I shall be answered, 'Passages of scripture positively declare there will be such.' I admit it: but there are no passages which reveal it, which do not also shew that the church will not be in it. As far as I am aware they are these: Jeremiah 30:7; Daniel 12:1; Matthew 24:21; Mark 13:19; to which we may add Revelation 3:10; 7:14. I am not aware of any other which can be applied to this subject. Now who are in this tribulation in the passages which speak of it in Scripture? Revelation 7:14 could alone leave open the

Christians who saw themselves as the remnant found in the prophecies of the Old Testament logically believed they would pass through the coming tribulation. They waited for the events recorded in Scripture as occurring before or in connection with the Lord's appearing to take place, and, according to Darby's view, thus lost the proper Christian hope of the coming of the Lord for them at any moment. Instead of being in a state of expectancy waiting for him, they waited for a certain number of events to take place first:

To me the Lord's coming is not a question of prophecy, but my present hope. Events before His judging the quick [Matthew 25:31–46] are the subject of prophecy; His coming to receive the Church is our present hope. There is no event between me and *heaven*.<sup>93</sup>

It is this conviction, that the Church is properly heavenly, in its calling and relationship with Christ, forming no part of the course of events of the earth, which makes its rapture so simple and clear; and on the other hand, it shows how the denial of its rapture brings down the Church to an earthly position, and destroys its whole spiritual character and position. Our calling is on high. Events are on earth. Prophecy does not relate to heaven. The Christian's hope is not a prophetic subject at all.<sup>94</sup>

Those who have not the hope of the Lord's return cannot apprehend what is the true path of a Christian; they may have life, of course, in one sense, but they

smallest question. ... Of all the rest, the positive evidence is, that the Jews are in it – the church not." *CW*, 11:164. As to Revelation 7, Darby wrote: "We have in this chapter God's people on earth: first, the Jews, then the Gentiles. These are those who go through the tribulation. They are the results of the everlasting gospel going out to the Gentiles after the church has been taken up. These saints, after the church is gone, are living in earthly circumstances and have the highest kind of comfort you can have. ... The Gentiles seen in chapter 7 are those who have gone through the tribulation and therefore have a higher place of blessing than those born during the millennium. The great tribulation is not the same as Jacob's trial [Jacob's trouble – Jeremiah 30:7–11]; the former is connected with the whole earth, whilst the latter only applies to Israel. They may be going on at the same time." *CW*, 28:364. See Darby's papers "What Saints will be in the Tribulation?" *CW*, 11:110–117 and "The Rapture of the Saints and the Character of the Jewish Remnant," *CW*, 11:118–167.

<sup>93</sup> *Letters*, 1:329–330. Cf., *CW*, 5:104: "He says, 'I come quickly.' In principle, nothing between the present moment and the coming of the Lord prevents the believer's laying hold of His coming." These sentiments can also be found in the *The Morning Watch* (December 1831): 253: "And we miss the true object of faith and hope in the coming of the Lord, not only when we overleap it altogether, but when we interpose any screen whatever; when we look for any event of persecution or tribulation, for any combination of kings, any gathering of people, any manifestation of Antichrist. The immediate coming of Christ, and our preparation to meet Him, should be now the sole object of steadfast faith, and earnest desire, and constant preparation."

<sup>94</sup> *CW*, 11:156.

have not the proper stamp of heavenly life in their daily practice down here. If I am waiting for someone to come and take me up out of it [the world] what then is the world to me? What comes of its plans, and its running after money, and all that kind of thing?<sup>95</sup>

[The Lord's return] was to run like a thread through the whole framework of Christian thoughts and feelings. It teaches us how to walk, in looking for glory.<sup>96</sup>

If there are no events which must first be fulfilled before the Lord comes for His own, then there are also no possible means by which Christians may be able to calculate the date of his coming, as so many had tried to do:

People who attempt to fix time are wholly mistaken. The Father has kept that in His own power. Not that we may not discern the times; the Lord says, "How is it that ye do not discern this time?" There are moral elements around us that a spiritual mind discerns at once; but the fixing of dates is a mistake.<sup>97</sup>

If world conditions became more and more like those the prophets said would precede the tribulation and the coming of the Lord to execute judgment, the Lord's coming for the Church was considered to be very near, for he must have the Church with Himself before the tribulation on earth can begin.<sup>98</sup>

Darby felt that as the Church lost sight of its true character and thus its true hope as well, it became governed not only by Jewish principles, but also by worldly ones. It became like the evil servant who said, "My lord delayeth his coming; And [began] to smite his fellow servants, and to eat and drink with the drunken" (Matt 24:48).

<sup>95</sup> *Notes and Jottings*, 99.

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*, 194.

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*, 84. Interestingly, in his early days, Darby did attempt to calculate dates for the rapture before coming to view the effort as futile. See *CW*, 5:158, 204.

<sup>98</sup> There has been a variety of views among Christians on this point, with pre-trib, mid-trib and post-trib rapture views. It is interesting to note the following remarks from *The Morning Watch* (June 1830): 314, on what appears to support a pre-trib position: "So that when the judgment doth come, Christ will come beforehand, and gather his saints to himself: and that all the inhabitants of the earth should not be gathered, is the effect of their own unbelief and impenitency." When dealing with the subject of the rapture, articles in *The Morning Watch* refer to it as the "translation." E.g., "That great mystery of the translation of the living saints, by an instantaneous transition, from the state of mortality into the state of immortality; and this, and no other, do I believe to be the way of our escape.... Now, with respect to the time at which this translation of the saints taketh place, it is not to be doubted, as I think, that its time is before the judgments which fall upon the earth at the coming of the Son of Man and the setting up of his kingdom." *The Morning Watch* (March 1830): 158.

In the New [Testament], the relationship of the church with Christ caused the Holy Ghost to remain in it, and communicate the needed light on its position while waiting for the Lord. There was no presence of God attached to formal institutions subsisting, to consistency with which a series of prophets was to recall a people (necessarily, while they subsisted, the people of God). In one respect, however, though the church was not the proper subject of prophecy, while it subsisted as owned of God, certain things connected with it are predicted; that is, its decay and corruption, as a present moral warning; but this passes into mere apostate wickedness, as a distinct object of judgment.<sup>99</sup>

Some found it difficult to see a difference between the rapture (Christ coming for His own) and the appearing (Christ returning with His own in glory to set up the kingdom), but for Darby it was simply a question of bowing to God's Word. Darby had a simple, logical explanation: "It is clearly and distinctly revealed, that, when Christ appears, we shall appear with Him in glory; and therefore it is simply impossible that we should be on earth till His appearing, and 'at that time;' because we appear with Him from heaven 'at that time.'"<sup>100</sup>

But for him it was much more than just a logical argument. It was a question of the heart and bowing to God's Word:

Those who believe in the rapture of the Church before the appearing of Christ hold that the Church has a special and peculiar character and connection with Christ. ... The Church's joining Christ has nothing to do with Christ's appearing or coming to earth. Her place is elsewhere. She sits in Him already in heavenly places. She has to be brought there as to bodily presence... The thing she has to expect for herself is not... Christ's appearing, but her being taken up where He is.<sup>101</sup>

It is no mistake to be always expecting the Lord to return. The object of the conversion of the Thessalonians was to wait for God's Son from heaven. People fancy that the truth of the Lord's return is a bit of knowledge at the top of the tree; but instead of that, it is what the Thessalonians were converted for, and meanwhile they are to serve God.<sup>102</sup>

<sup>99</sup> *CW*, 11:46.

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid.*, 10:258.

<sup>101</sup> *CW*, 11:119, 153.

<sup>102</sup> *Notes and Jottings*, 4.

It is not a matter of spiritual judgment, whether or not we are to look for the Lord; but it is linked up with all that characterises the Christian, instead of being just a bit of knowledge to be specially attained.<sup>103</sup>

Are our hearts really waiting for God's Son from heaven? I do not talk of understanding the prophecies—very blessed in their place—but the Morning Star is what belongs to us, a heavenly Christ who has given His life for us. As, then, we are found looking to be with and like Christ for ever, this helps us to go through this world. The character attaching to the Christian is, then, that of watching. It is not understanding prophecy, but it is attachment to Christ as having got the promise that He is coming so that we are waiting for Him. Such have found Christ precious to them, and they say, "Oh, that He would come!" Are we Christians, then, as men that wait for their Lord? If the Lord were to come tonight, would He be able to say of each one of us, "*There is a blessed servant*"? Remember He is waiting more truly than we are.<sup>104</sup>

### The Ruin and Judgment of the Church

Darby saw another reason for Christ coming for His own, besides the fact that He wants those He had died for, His bride, to be with Him: He can no longer recognize the Church (in its "house" character) as a testimony to Himself and the truth, since it has failed in its outward testimony here on earth (as all dispensations had) and He will judge it.<sup>105</sup> But before beginning with his judgments on professing or apostate Christendom he will remove the saints, the true confessors.

We insist on the fact that the house has been ruined, its ordinances perverted, its orders and all its arrangements forsaken or destroyed; that human

<sup>103</sup> *Notes and Jottings*, 196.

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.*, 184.

<sup>105</sup> "And connected with this, is the direct warning of the excision of the church\* on its failure of maintaining effectually this position." "[\*Note to translation. 'Church' refers here merely to professing Christendom.]" From "Evidence from Scripture of the passing away of the present dispensation (1831)," *CW*, 2:93. The "position" here being the one described in Titus 2:14, 1 Peter 2:9 and Philippians 2:15. He goes on: "For the powers of the heavens shall be shaken, Jerusalem shall be trodden down till - but that "till" comes in desolation and destruction on the apostate Gentiles: for when they say, Peace and safety, behold sudden destruction shall come upon them, as travail upon a woman with child, and they shall not escape; and the professing church is the special object of this, as it is specially responsible." *CW*, 2:118 For true believers, those who belong to the bride, this coming though initiating the judgments on earth does not involve judgment for them: "The rapture of the church has nothing to do with responsibility; it is the fulfilment of the highest blessings of sovereign grace - Christ's coming to take us to Himself, that where He is, there we may be also." *CW*, 11:186.

ordinances, a human order, have been substituted for them; and, what merits all attention of faith, we insist that the Lord... is coming soon in His power and glory to judge all this state of things.<sup>106</sup>

In Darby's view, after the true Church is gone from this earth—all those who had known Christ as their Lord and Savior and had life in him—there will be a lifeless, professing Church here that will continue on until the end of this age and the present dispensation and then undergo the Lord's judgment. Darby understood the apostle Paul's warning in Romans 11:16–21 in this way. Apostate Christendom is judged in Revelation 17. The kingdom with its center and restored temple in Jerusalem (the age to come) will then take the place of the corrupt church. (This new dispensation is also to end in ruin with Christ returning after the 1000 years to raise the remaining dead, exercise final judgment and usher in the eternal state.) As in the days, when the Christian testimony first began and God put the Jewish system fully aside and judged it in the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70, so will it be in the case of the church. Before Jerusalem was destroyed the Lord called all his own to leave it, so that when the city was destroyed there was not (it is claimed) a single Christian in it. When the system of Christendom is judged there will not be a single true believer left in it, for the Lord will have called them all to Himself.<sup>107</sup>

This is where Darby differed from others in his time. The true church, those with life in Christ who made up his body, would not go through the tribulation at all in his view. Christ would not allow his bride to suffer. It would be the lifeless, professing church which would pass through judgment.<sup>108</sup> It is interesting to note, that

<sup>106</sup> *CW*, 4:10.

<sup>107</sup> The believing Jewish remnant and the "great multitude" in Revelation 7:9–17 are not to be confused with believing Christians. In his lectures and papers dealing with prophetic subjects Darby repeatedly refers to it being the professing church, or professing Christendom, which will go through the tribulation and not the saints. Only unbelievers will be "left behind." E.g. in answer to the question "whether the saints will be caught away ere vengeance bursts upon the professors," Darby replied: "That the saints are caught away before vengeance bursts upon professors is quite certain, because it is when Christ appears that He executes vengeance. (2 Thess 1:8–10 and a multitude of passages.) Now when Christ appears, we appear with Him. (Col. 3:4.) Matt. 13:41, 43 only proves that, when the wicked are judged, the righteous shine forth; but they had been previously gathered into the garner, in order to do so." *Letters*, 3:334. Elsewhere, he says, "The professing church, if it did not continue in God's goodness, would, as an outward thing, be cut off." *CW*, 11:296. "And remember it is the professing church that is thus spued out, and not the church of the living God, the body and bride of Christ." *Ibid.*, 5:368. "There is a point which, I think, has not been duly borne in mind; it is that the unfaithful servant will, for the judgment, pass over into the time of the Son of man's judgment, so that what is called the Church may go on, in whatever apostasy of condition, into the state of things which takes place when the body of the faithful is gone." *Ibid.*, 13:367.

<sup>108</sup> Now believers are in a "dual" position as members of Christ's body, the church, and the kingdom in its present form. When the kingdom is set up on earth in power, the millennium, there will

while Darby claimed not to have been influenced by others in his understanding of the distinction between Israel and the church<sup>109</sup> he did not make this same claim as to the rapture. In 1850 he wrote, “It was this passage [2 Thessalonians 2:1–2] which, twenty years ago, made me understand the rapture of the saints before—perhaps a considerable time before—the day of the Lord (that is before the judgment of the living)” [Matt 25:31–46].<sup>110</sup>

Apparently these two verses helped Darby to understand the rapture in the way it has since then become connected with his name, but it was someone else who directed his attention to them. William Kelly, the later editor of Darby’s *Collected Writings*, and onetime close friend and a Brethren leader in his own right, wrote an article published in 1903 entitled, “The Rapture of the Saints: who suggested it, or rather on what Scripture?”<sup>111</sup> In it, he relates having spoken with Benjamin Wills Newton in the summer of 1845. Newton had told him then that many years before Darby had written him a letter in which he stated that through a suggestion made to him by a Mr. Thomas Tweedy involving the passage in 2 Thessalonians he had received decisive biblical proof that the rapture would take place before the day of the Lord, and this cleared up difficulties he had previously felt on this point.<sup>112</sup> Benjamin Wills Newton was an early co-worker with Darby only to become a strong adversary in later years. In the Fry Collection held at the University of Manchester Library containing transcripts of Newton’s notebooks the following is found on page 238 of the “large book”:

be believers on earth, but they are not part of the church in Darby’s view: “The church is altogether above and beyond the kingdom; the church is a happy people associated with Christ in the love God has for Him. The church will reign with Christ over the kingdom, and she now owns Christ as King by right.” *Ibid.*, 32:403.

<sup>109</sup> “But I must, though without comment, direct attention to chapter 32 of the same prophet [Isaiah]; which I do the rather, because it was in this the Lord was pleased, without man’s teaching, first to open my eyes on this subject, that I might learn His will concerning it throughout—not by the first blessed truths stated in it, but the latter part, when there shall be a complete change in the dispensation.” *CW*, 2:108.

<sup>110</sup> *Ibid.*, 11:67.

<sup>111</sup> William Kelly, ed., *Bible Treasury*, new series, 4:314–318.

<sup>112</sup> I do not here go into the question of a possible influence on Darby through the Scot, Margaret MacDonald (1815–ca. 1840), and her vision of the end times in 1830 as there is really no basis for the assumption. Besides the fact that Darby considered her utterances to be demonic in origin there is no real correspondence between them and what Darby later taught. She seems to have spoken more of a post-tribulation rather than a pre-tribulation rapture. Darby’s visit to Scotland in connection with the supposed appearance of supernatural gifts there is recorded in *CW*, 6:284–285. See also Timothy C. F. Stunt, “J. N. Darby and Tongues at Row: A Recent Manuscript Discovery,” *Brethren Historical Review* 12 (2016): 1–21, which deals with a recent discovery of Darby’s manuscript account of his visit in Row.

At last Darby wrote from Cork saying he had discovered a method of reconciling the whole dispute, and would tell us when he came. When he did, it turned out to be the “Jewish interpretation.” The Gospel of Matthew was not teaching Church-Truth but Kingdom-Truth—and so on. He explained it to me & I said “Darby, if you admit that distinction you virtually give up Christianity.” Well, they kept on at that until they worked out the result as we know it. The “Secret Rapture” was bad enough but this was worse.<sup>113</sup>

Newton guessed the letter was from either 1832 or 1833 and maybe the one he meant when speaking with Kelly about Tweedy. Tweedy was a later Brethren missionary in Demerara (now Guyana).<sup>114</sup> For Darby the Lord’s coming was a living and real hope: “If we were really waiting for Christ, would we be heaping up money and property here? Would we be really glad if Christ came to-night, I mean as to the state of our hearts?”<sup>115</sup>

Just as dispensationalist views existed long before Darby’s time, so they did not cease to develop after him—as the following chapters demonstrate. It would be of

<sup>113</sup> Benjamin Wills Newton, Samuel Prideaux Tregelles, Frederick William Wyatt, and Alfred Charles Fry. The Fry Collection Relating to Benjamin Wills Newton, S. P. Tregelles, F. W. Wyatt and A. C. Fry. University of Manchester Library, 1815–1838, CBA 7049, <https://luna.manchester.ac.uk/luna/servlet/detail/nonconform~91~1~393922~163594?qvq=q%3ACBA+7049&mi=0&trs=>. Darby was for some time uncertain if the rapture as he understood it would be secret or not, i.e. if it was an event the rest of the world would see or not. In an undated letter to Benjamin W. Newton (which internal evidence suggests was written in either early 1841 or possibly late 1840), Darby stated: “As to any secret coming I have no conviction about it and the proofs to me are certainly very feeble and vague. — I attach however no importance to them.” I have a photocopy of the original letter, a transcript of which can be found on page 322 of the “large book” in the Fry Collection: <https://luna.manchester.ac.uk/luna/servlet/detail/nonconform~91~1~393922~163594?qvq=q%3ACBA+7049&mi=0&trs=1>. It is worth noting, Darby’s 1857 paper “The Coming of the Lord and the Translation of the Church” contains the subheading “An attempt to answer the questions, ‘May the coming of the Lord be expected immediately? and Will the translation of the church be secret?’” *CW*, 11:177–192, but regrettably does not actually deal with the question of the secrecy of the Church’s translation, i.e. rapture. Articles in *The Morning Watch* presented the rapture as an event not comprehended by those not involved in it, i.e. by those left behind. For instance:

To those who are watching and praying, and expecting their Lord, and to them only, will Christ be manifested at the beginning of the day of his coming, when he comes as the sign of the Son of Man (Matt. xxiv.) as the morning star (Rev. ii. 28, xxii. 16). To the rest of the church, and to the world, this first appearance will be but as a meteor or cloud of radiance, preternatural and unaccountable, but unintelligible.” *The Morning Watch* (June 1832): 374.

<sup>114</sup> For more on Tweedy see: T. C. F. Stunt, “Leonard Strong: The Motives and Experiences of Early Missionary Work in British Guiana,” *Christian Brethren Research Fellowship Journal*, no. 34 (1983): 95–105; and F. Roy Coad, *Prophetic Developments, with Particular Reference to the Early Brethren Movement* (Pinner, Middlesex: Christian Brethren Research Fellowship, 1966).

<sup>115</sup> *Notes and Jottings*, 184.

interest to know how Darby would have viewed Zionism, the founding of the State of Israel,<sup>116</sup> and the constant interpretation of current events by dispensationalists who view these events as fulfillments and sure signs of the end, when Darby himself was convinced that nothing stood between him and the Lord's Coming.

### Darby's Contribution to Dispensational Thought

Darby's contribution to dispensational thought can be summed up with several of his noted distinctions: distinguishing between the earthly and heavenly people of God which resulted in a new way to approach and interpret biblical passages; his view that the Church did not exist before Pentecost; his distinguishing between the kingdom and the Church as not being identical or interchangeable terms for one and the same group of people; the new covenant as being with Israel and not the Church; the any moment pre-tribulation rapture of the Church and a Jewish remnant, having nothing at all to do with the Church, with an earthly kingdom centered in Jerusalem.

In the course of this chapter, I have repeatedly quoted others who had very similar thoughts to Darby, at times almost identical. When reading some of his works we find him making statements as if they were new, though others had said the same long before him. Of course, the charge of plagiarism has been made, but can that be justified? Leaving aside Darby's own sense of honesty, blatantly copying something or someone and taking the credit for it would have been risky, to say the least. Periodicals like *The Morning Watch* were widely accessible to those who were interested in such topics. A downright copying of ideas could have been easily proven. Darby's theology was formed over a period of years, but once he became settled in it, his ideas became more popular than those of others who had been saying similar things. Why? Even if minimal, there indeed was a difference—be it only in the coalescing of those various ideas into a unified whole. Many people were saying many things. Helpful things mixed up with confusing ones. A regular hodgepodge affair. Groups and movements in the time Darby's ideas and views were forming came and went, yet the end result of what Darby eventually formulated and propagated evidently made more sense than the rest. It had a certain cohesion, a certain system, even if he claimed to dislike systems.

<sup>116</sup> Here, *The Morning Watch* (December 1831): 253, was, as history has shown, in error: "The same moment that first sees the Jews assume a national unity, will also witness the rapture of the saints into the air; because the one is the outward and visible concomitant of the invisible but equally literal fact."

What Darby finally presented was certainly a mix of his own ideas and insights as well as an input from others of which he made more or less conscious use. The interesting thing is, though Darby is known for not being generous in mentioning his sources he had no difficulties in the beginning when it came to mentioning Irving or *The Morning Watch*.<sup>117</sup> If he was consciously copying anything from them while claiming they were his own original views, why lay the trail for his critics to the sources which would expose him as being dishonest? In his own mind, if not necessarily in the opinion of everybody else, there were differences enough between his views and convictions and what he heard and read from others to enable him to have a free conscience in expressing his views as his own. But even if it is possible to prove some concrete source of ideas in Darby's case, that does not mean that these same ideas functioned within Darby's view in the same way as within the source he obtained them from. For example, he was able to combine the positive attitude as expressed in forms of postmillennialism with the negative views on ultimate ruin in a new way and context which offered a different kind of hope. What came together in the end was understandable and could be passed on—up till today. That does not make it automatically correct, but it shows that his contribution was in some way different from those schemes which were not as readily accepted.

A part of the question regarding Darby's originality may have to do with the amount of time involved before some of his ideas solidified. As we have seen, he claimed there was no human, outside influence involved in his coming to believe that there was a distinct future for the people of Israel. It was something he suddenly realized, as it were, while reading Isaiah 32. Reading the passage, he refers to it is easy to see how he could come to such an insight. The rapture, or "secret rapture," if one prefers, is somewhat more complex. It is not on the surface in the same way. There is no one single passage which makes a clear, unambiguous statement. But, given a certain approach, it can be derived from an interplay of various passages. Looking back, Darby saw how, in the end, all the things he came to believe as true were interwoven, so that in a certain sense it is understandable that he remembered the source of it all to have been while recovering from his injury in 1827/28. Yet his understanding of the rapture in the way for which he has become infamous, took longer than a sudden insight. It was a more complicated affair and his occupation with it stretched over a period of several years after 1827/28. It took time for him to come to a firm, personal conviction and when one considers the fact that he was in constant interaction with what was going on around him during this period of prophetic inquiry,

<sup>117</sup> For example he repeatedly quotes from Irving's "Preliminary Discourse" in *The Coming of Messiah in Glory and Majesty* in the already referred to "Reflections Upon the Prophetic Inquiry and the Views Advanced in It." *CW*, 2:7, 9. He even mentions a "profitable and timely sermon of Mr. Irving's." *Ibid.*, 2:19.

an influence through others was simply as unavoidable as it was natural. His views on Israel in connection with the Isaiah passage may have been something like a sudden revelation, but his understanding of the rapture definitely was not. It evolved slowly, it was a careful process of weighing the pros and cons of what he heard and read. That is why, in my opinion, he never claimed non-human influence regarding his understanding of the rapture the way he did regarding Isaiah 32.

Darby's view on prophecy, on the rapture, resulted from his views as to what the true Church is, how it differs from all that had come before or would come in the future. Darby's views on the Church and those of others from whom he may have borrowed ideas as to prophecy were not the same. Darby's understanding of the Church and of prophecy are not elements which can be detached from one another and handled separately. This has been done by the majority who share his views on the rapture and may contribute to why some accuse him of plagiarism because the way his prophetic views are interwoven with his Church views is not sufficiently recognized. Darby did not simply steal someone else's ideas and claim they were his own. His ideas developed from his understanding of Christ and the Church—however right or wrong they were. Writing in 1850 he remarked:

The first point, then, important to understand is, that neither the church, nor Jerusalem, nor the Gentiles, are in themselves the objects of prophecy, still less Nineveh, or Babylon, or the like, but Christ. But this is what gives us the true scope and intelligence of the real importance and place of each subject; namely, as Christ is to be the centre in which all things in heaven and earth are to be united, various subjects become the sphere of His glory, as connected with Him, and each subject is set in its place in its connection with Him, and by this connection I get the means of understanding what is said about it. Thus, if the church is the Lamb's wife, it is in this character and in this relationship I must apprehend what regards it. If Jerusalem is the city of the great King, it is in this that I shall get the key to the dealings of God with it. If the saints are to live and reign with Christ, and to be kings and priests unto God and His Father, here I shall find the intelligence of what concerns them in this character: not united with the Bridegroom, but associated with the King and Priest. And so of the rest.

Not only is this the only way of understanding prophecy as to the objects of it, but, the affections being right, the understanding is clear - the eye is simple and the body full of light. I see with God in the matter, for He regards Christ; and thus prophecy becomes sanctifying, not speculative, because what it teaches becomes a part of Christ's glory for the soul. The importance of this cannot be well overrated. I ought not to have to persuade Christians of the truth of this; I gladly would of its importance. This, however, is the work of God.

Objectively, I may cite Ephesians 1:9-11 as stating this great truth according to the purpose of God.<sup>118</sup>

And from his lecture on Luke 12:35–53:

Talking about prophecy is all very easy and interesting in its place, but when a soul has got salvation, then there are two subjects in Scripture; the government of this world, and the sovereignty of grace which takes poor sinners and sets them in Christ. Prophecy refers to the government of this world, and the Jews are the centre of that; but as for the Christian, I find that he is predestinated to be conformed to the image of Christ, that He might be the firstborn among many brethren.<sup>119</sup>

### Conclusion

In the end, I feel that Arthur Koestler's comments in his classic work, *The Sleepwalkers*, regarding developments and progress in science, can be applied to Darby and his situation. Koestler uses the expression "ripeness of the age" to describe important pre-conditions in order for basic discoveries to occur and gain acceptance. "It is an elusive quality, for the 'ripeness' of a science," stated Koester, "for a decisive change is not determined by the situation in that particular science alone, but by the general climate of the age." As Koestler saw it, change in science or art is "ripe" when feelings of dissatisfaction occur within a field of study thought to be "out of step" with the mainstream. Progress is then ripe due to frustrations that conventional measures have become "meaningless, divorced from living reality, isolated from the integral whole." Hubris then yields to the painful reappraisal of basic axioms, that period of "soul-searching" when hidden presuppositions are recognized as having been taken for granted "to the thaw of dogma." It is this very situation, Koestler contended, "which provides genius with the opportunity for his creative plunge under the broken surface."<sup>120</sup>

Darby and his times cannot be better described. I would not call Darby the "father" of modern dispensationalism in the sense of its "creator." The "inventor" perhaps, if understood in the way Donald Harman Akenson made the distinction:

Inventors do not create, for creation is to make something where there was nothing. Inventors use what is to hand, and then they add something of their

<sup>118</sup> *CW*, 11:41–42.

<sup>119</sup> *Notes and Jottings*, 178.

<sup>120</sup> Arthur Koestler, *The Sleepwalkers: A History of Man's Changing Vision of the Universe*, 3rd ed. (London: Hutchinson & Co., 1961), 519–520.

own genius, whether it is new ways of recombining old elements, or tiny little improvements in existing parts so that what otherwise would not work does: or they take out their tools and make a part of new design and suddenly everything works.<sup>121</sup>

Darby would not have viewed himself as the creator or inventor of anything, but rather as someone who, through God's grace, was permitted to recover truths that the early Church in his opinion had known and held but lost through unfaithfulness. We can trace developments and see connections and interconnections of thoughts and ideas which were commonplace at the time Darby was struggling with his views. Given the circumstances, perhaps something like Darby's view had to eventually evolve. He of course would have viewed it quite differently, as God working in and through human circumstances and time. In his understanding, God could open up lost truths to him because he was willing to take a position of responsibility for and identification with what he saw as the ruin of the Church's testimony—and to all others who took the same position before God in humility.<sup>122</sup>

Darby did not create dispensationalism; it existed in many forms before his time. Yet he does serve as dispensationalism's clear pivot to its present-day form, shape, and direction. Perhaps here, an illustration may be drawn from the literary world to close out this chapter, as expressed by Margaret Blount in *Animal Land: The Creatures of Children's Fiction*. When considering similarities between certain elements in J. R. R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* and H. G. Well's *The Crystal Egg*, Blount comes to the conclusion that, whatever resemblances there may be, ultimately, they mean something entirely different. She then offers a profound reason why: "Magic lies in the method or rearrangement of material, sources are bones, lifeless by themselves."<sup>123</sup> Drawing on the analogy, whatever sources Darby may or may not have used, his rearrangement of them was the magic which gave life to the bones.

<sup>121</sup> Donald Harman Akenson, *Surpassing Wonder: The Invention of the Bible and the Talmuds* (New York: Harcourt, 1998), 24.

<sup>122</sup> Darby wrote: "The Church of God is in ruins. The truth has been hidden, covered over with the dust of centuries: but God has been graciously removing the dust, leading the saints back to the word and restoring to them the glorious truths therein. He has recovered to us the glorious truth of the Lord's coming; the heavenly calling of the saints; the new creation, the principle of the assembly, etc." From "On the Baptism of Households," Stem Publishing, [http://www.stempublishing.com/authors/darby/New7\\_96/Baptism.html](http://www.stempublishing.com/authors/darby/New7_96/Baptism.html). Elsewhere: "Do they say all is in ruins? Well, do they take part in it as Daniel did, or do they fancy they are going to be something out of it, and so deny that it is so? The ruin is our ruin if we are identified with Christ's glory in the world. We may, if enabled, separate the precious from the vile, and if so be blessed in faithfulness; if continuing humble, the Head can never fail those who wait on Him." *Letters*, 3:388.

<sup>123</sup> Margaret Blount, *Animal Land: The Creatures of Children's Fiction* (London: Hutchinson, 1974), 281. Emphasis added.

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Nota bene: All Darby volumes can be accessed through Kingston Bible Trust at: <https://www.stempublishing.com/authors/darby/>.