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J.N. Darby, dispensational eschatology, and the formation of trans-Atlantic evangelicalism

Crawford Gribben (Queen's University Belfast)

Abstract: This article will describe the relationship between dispensationalism, a redemptive-historical reading of the Bible with a distinctive premillennial eschatology, and the formation of trans-Atlantic evangelicalism. Emerging from the literature of the Plymouth Brethren in the mid-nineteenth century, "dispensationalism" was appropriated by a broader constituency of conservative Protestants as a mechanism to explain cultural decay, theological challenge and ecclesiastical disorder. This eschatological theory was re-profiled in the *Scofield Reference Bible* (Oxford University Press, 1909; second edition, 1917) with enormous success. While it did not dominate the conservative theological "position papers" published as *The Fundamentals* (1910-15), this new eschatological perspective became a central component of "fundamentalism." This article will argue that the success of this new eschatological system was made possible by its simplification and mass distribution through a variety of new media, and that the turn towards fiction, which is so evident in the success of *Left Behind* (1995-2006), is almost as old as the system of theology to which it has given voice.

Key words: Premillennialism, dispensationalism, media, fundamentalism, J. N. Darby

Evangelical prophecy narratives have a secure standing in the American cultural mainstream. Since the mid-1990s, best-seller lists have regularly featured installments from a growing literary culture of apocalyptic fiction. The *Left Behind* novels (1995-2006), by Tim LaHaye and

Jerry B. Jenkins, respectively a veteran prophecy writer and novelist-biographer, sold some 65 million units to create what became the best-selling fiction series in American literary history. LaHaye and Jenkins oversaw a media empire, the significance of which was demonstrated by their being featured on the front covers of *Time* (2002) and *Newsweek* (2004), in an expanding franchise that promoted a controversial video game alongside several cinematic releases, the most recent of which starring Nicholas Cage (2014).[1] The success of *Left Behind* encouraged other prophecy writers to turn to fiction, either to affirm or confute the series' theological claims. Most significantly, perhaps, Joel Rosenberg's *The last jihad* (2002) seemed to anticipate the 9/11 attacks in imagining, in a plot finalized by the early summer of 2001, that Islamist terrorists would hijack a plane to use as a guided missile in an effort to assassinate the American president.[2] Despite their variety, these contributions worked to confirm the priority of a distinctive plot structure – even if only as a foil for their alternative. But, as *Left Behind* attracted increasing numbers of readers, authors with no apparent commitment to the series' religious presuppositions rushed to take advantage of its claims. Liz Jensen's *The rapture* (2010) presented a critique of environmental carelessness in a narrative that was scathing about the abusive power of fundamentalist religion. Similarly, *The leftovers* (2012), a novel by Tom Perrotta, was developed into a popular television series by HBO and is now entering its third season, pitching plot lines that are entirely dependent upon an established pre-millennial theology. Evangelical prophecy narratives evolved within a sectional religious media culture, and the influence they have achieved in the cultural mainstream can be measured by the fact that authors who have no

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[1] For a survey of this literary culture, see Crawford Gribben, *Writing the rapture: Prophecy fiction in evangelical America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011). For a broader discussion of evangelical prophecy culture, see Crawford Gribben, *Evangelical millennialism in the trans-Atlantic world, 1500-2000* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009).

[2] Gribben, *Writing the rapture*, p. 147.

sympathy for evangelical ideals now use their narratives to critique the cultures from which they emerged.

This distinctively American cultural phenomenon has few European parallels, as much of the recent scholarship recognises. Matthew Avery Sutton's *American apocalypse: A history of modern evangelicalism* (2014) used the emergence of this prophetic culture to account for the story of American evangelicalism in the first half of the twentieth century, when dispensational premillennialism was promoted by American institutions, popularized by American preachers, and consumed by those concerned about the American future. Sutton's work drew upon and pushed beyond a generation of historical writing that had linked the new prophetic culture to the emergence of protestant fundamentalism. But other scholarship is recognizing that this American culture has European roots, with parameters that were developed among a network of elite Anglicans worried about the future of the Church of Ireland and its social network of big Ascendency houses in the early nineteenth century. As the present author suggestedm, and Donald Akenson has recently confirmed, in *Discovering the end of time: Irish evangelicals in the age of Daniel O'Connell* (2016), the eschatological ideas that have become normative among American evangelicals, and which attract so few European adherents, are Ireland's most important theological export: the evangelical prophetic narrative that has come to be recognized as a central component of American fundamentalism has its origins in early nineteenth-century Ireland.[3]

The roots of dispensationalism

In Dublin and county Wicklow, in the 1820s and 1830s, pious aristocrats looked with dismay at the demands for Irish democracy that seemed to require the end of their privileged world. Fears of the future were widespread. Francis Danby's expansive apocalyptic painting, *The*

[3] Mark S. Sweetnam and Crawford Gribben, "J. N. Darby and the Irish origins of dispensationalism," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 52 (2009), pp. 569-77.

opening of the sixth seal (1828), expressed the apocalyptic concern that had developed among Irish protestants in the aftermath of the loss of the American colonies, the French revolution, rebellion in Ireland in 1798, and continued demands for political change. With growing concerns about the established church and its assumptions about the state's governance of religion, Irish protestants began to critique the optimism then dominant among evangelicals that protestant Christianity would expand throughout the world until the Second Coming of Jesus Christ. Backtracking from the Church of Ireland and the postmillennial hope then common among evangelicals, they constructed what some critics have described as a narrative of despair, reading prophetic scripture to make sense of their unhappy situation. Gathering in informal congregations, the movement that became known as the "Plymouth Brethren" drew in a very specific climate of political and religious concern.[4] The Brethren movement, Akenson has claimed, "arose in Ireland because it was an analgesic reaction to the rapid slide by the Church of Ireland in its power and influence in the late 1820s and early 1830s."[5] John Nelson Darby (1800-1882), one of the principal leaders of the new religious movement, admitted the fact. He came from a wealthy family, with immediate connections to a trans-Atlantic social and commercial network that included such luminaries as Thomas Jefferson, Benjamin Franklin, George Washington, Adam Smith, and Joseph Priestly. Leap Castle, in Ireland's county Offaly, was one of a number of properties (though it is better known today as the most haunted castle in Ireland) owned by the family as their material circumstances steadily improved. In the 1820s, Darby was successively a student at Trinity College Dublin, an aspirant for the bar, then a deacon and increasingly reluctant priest of the Church of Ireland. Later in life, he linked his decision to identify with the new

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[4] Timothy C. F. Stunt, *From awakening to secession: Radical evangelicals in Switzerland and Britain, 1815-35* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2000); Tim Grass, *Gathering to his name: The story of Open Brethren in Britain and Ireland* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2006), pp. 9-110.

[5] Donald Harman Akenson, *Discovering the end of time: Irish evangelicals in the age of Daniel O'Connell* (Montreal and Kingston, Canada: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2016), p. 275.

religious movement with the political and social circumstances of the early nineteenth century: "I, a conservative by birth, by education and by mind; a Protestant in Ireland into the bargain; I had been moved to the very depths of my soul on seeing that everything was going to be shaken."[6] William Kelly, one of Darby's early adherents, also commented on the social formation of the new movement, remembering that Brethren "were long ridiculed at first as a knot of high Tory gentlemen and ladies, unable to endure either the corruptions of Anglicanism or the vulgarity of dissent," who had established their meetings as a "sort of Madeira climate for their delicate lungs."[7] As Kelly's comment implies, the new narrative of despair reflected individual declines in fortune as much as it did the slow decay of the Anglo-Irish world. Lady Theodosia Powerscourt's letters, though published in edited form shortly after her death, illustrate that a number of those adherents of the movement with the most prestigious titles were facing serious questions about their own financial and personal circumstances: the recently widowed second wife of the owner of a substantial county Wicklow estate had to endure both the opportunism of acquisitive relatives and the coming of age of her late husband's son, to whom ownership of her property would soon revert.[8] Nevertheless, the growth of the Plymouth Brethren movement was made possible by its leaders' privilege: the young men who most influenced its new and increasingly influential readings of Scripture were "competent in classical Greek" and New Testament exegesis, "accustomed to being fed without earning their keep, and unaccustomed to being baulked."[9] They developed their thinking with a populist touch, spreading their ideals by means of vigorous print production as a "People of the Booklet."[10] It was in this context that Darby and his editors and interpreters agreed upon the theology by which he would become

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[6] [J. N. Darby], *Letters of J.N.D* (n.d.), ii. 254.
[7] William Kelly, "Mr A. Moody Stuart on 'Brethren'," *Bible Treasury* 9 (1872), p. 352.
[8] Akenson, *Discovering the end of time*, pp. 237, 372-9.
[9] Akenson, *Discovering the end of time*, pp. 277, 282.
[10] Akenson, *Discovering the end of time*, p. 307.

recognized as having an influence upon modern Protestantism exceeded only by John Wesley, Martin Luther, and John Calvin, as "one of the founders of present-day American evangelicalism."[11]

The character of dispensationalism

The distinctive reading of redemptive history pioneered by the new Brethren movement was soon identified as "dispensational premillennialism." Darby's ideas retained some degree of flux throughout his life, but the basic structure of his reading of redemptive history remained fairly stable. After 1845, in a series of lectures given in Lausanne, he promoted an interpretive model that encouraged its followers to read the Bible through the occasionally complex lens of distinct "dispensations" – five periods of time in which an individual's faithfulness to God would be marked by specific obligations.[12] While his followers modified this redemptive-historical structure, most notably moving to a model of seven dispensations, they maintained Darby's claim that the next event predicted in biblical prophecy would be the "rapture" – the sudden disappearance of all true Christians – which would be followed by the tribulation, the rise of the Antichrist, the second coming of Jesus, and the millennial kingdom over which he would rule.[13]

This eschatological position was outlined and debated in a demanding literary culture in various forms and, increasingly, various genres. Brethren ideas were disseminated in pamphlets as well as serious journals of biblical criticism and theological inquiry: intellectually demanding publications such as the *Bible Witness and Review* (1877-81), edited by the former Presbyterian minister William Reid, which contained articles in Latin on the doctrine of propitiation, and the collected works of J. N. Darby, which Kelly edited in

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[11] Akenson, *Discovering the end of time*, pp. 3, 122.
[12] Larry V. Crutchfield, *The origins of dispensationalism: The Darby factor* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1992), passim.
[13] Gribben, *Evangelical millennialism*, pp. 71-91.

some 34 volumes, were supported by a vast enterprise of translation and textual criticism, which included Sir Lancelot Brenton's new edition of the Septuagint (1844), S. P. Tregelles' important work on the textual basis of the New Testament (1857-72), much of which was incorporated into the Revised Version of the Bible (1881), as well as Darby's translation of the New Testament into English (1867) and his participation in teams that translated the Bible into German (1871) and French (1881). But Brethren also worked to popularize their ideas. The structure of dispensationalism was outlined in a huge number of tracts, one of which, dating from around 1879, may provide the earliest example of an author using dispensational ideas to structure the writing of evangelical prophecy fiction, as we will see.[14] But Brethren ideas about the end of the world gathered most momentum when publicized outside of the movement.

With its narrative of despair, and assumptions about the increasingly marginal status of the godly, dispensationalism provided a perspective from which conservative protestants could interpret the challenges to traditional beliefs that were becoming increasingly evident in the second half of the twentieth century. As older certainties about Scripture were undermined by new theories about human origins and new doubts about the documentary provencence of biblical books, believers looked to new arguments to support their convictions as to its authority.[15] These attacks upon the veracity of Scripture were increasingly interpreted as evidence that its prophecies were being fulfilled. Believers could appropriate arguments that worked elsewhere to undermine the traditional confidence in Scripture by incorporating them within a broader narrative which taught that these kinds of arguments were to be expected in the last days.[16] For many protestants, therefore, Darby's dispensational model provided a key tool in the intellectual defence of Christianity: believers

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[14] Crawford Gribben, "Rethinking the rise of prophecy fiction: H.R.K.'s *Life in the Future* (?1879)," *Brethren Historical Review* 7 (2011), pp. 68-80.
[15] "The Bible and its critics," *The Bible Treasury* 12 (1878), pp. 62-64.
[16] J. N. Darby, "Characteristics of the faithful in the last days," *The Bible Treasury* 15 (1885), p. 220.

who understood the true character of the last days could also understand that those who sought to undermine the credibility of Scripture were actually confirming it.

The apologetic utility of dispensationalism may explain why Darby's new ideas were only selectively promoted. While Darby travelled widely in North America, his opinions about the end of the world were always more widely circulated than his claims about the inevitable decline of organized Christianity. Darby's ideas were only selectively adopted up by ministers and theologians within Presbyterian, Congregationalist and Baptist churches, who would have found the assistance provided by his end-times theology, and its appropriation of the literary and scientific challenges to Scripture, entirely undermined by his conviction that these denominations had no biblical warrant and certainly no future.[17] These ministers and theologians were certainly aware of the difficulties they had to face, which pushed them into the defence of conservative Protestantism. In north-eastern states of the USA, and then across the continent, in association with major institutions, and in new networks of the concerned, the emerging and trans-denominational party of "fundamentalists" preached a modified version of dispensationalism along with strict views of the inerrancy of Scripture while toning down Darby's insistence that believers should withdraw from all denominational entanglements.[18] Dispensational provided both a rationale for the present and a hope for the future. In the period between the end of the Civil War and the beginning of the First World War, and on both sides of the Atlantic, the new faith emerged to define the character of conservative Protestants who looked, increasingly, to safeguard their churches from the rapid decline of Christian civilization and to expect their deliverance from tribulation in the rapture. By the early decades of the

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[17] George Marsden, *Understanding fundamentalism and evangelicalism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1991), passim.

[18] E. R. Sandeen, *The origins of fundamentalism* (new edition, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008); Tim Grass, "How fundamentalist were British Brethren during the 1920s?", in David Bebbington and David Ceri Jones (eds), *Evangelicalism and fundamentalism in the United Kingdom during the twentieth century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), pp. 115-131.

twentieth century, many conservative protestants could not imagine how, in the absence of dispensationalism, the Christian faith could be defended.

The early history of dispensationalism is therefore a striking example of the Christian "invention of tradition." Dispensationalism won the minds of conservative protestants because it made sense of their world. It simplified history, providing a structure for human progress that directed attention to the inevitable decline of western civilization. It simplified ethics, explaining the inevitability of social decay, and confirming the dire predictions of nativist politicians, arguing for the necessity of mission even as it recognized that the number of true Christians would necessarily decline. It simplified ecclesiology, explaining what conservatives understood to be the theological enervation of the larger denominations, from which adherents were called to separate as ethical liberalism and German higher criticism took their toll. Dispensationalism also simplified politics, creating binaries by which the apocalyptic enemies of the Christian West – and then the Jewish people – could be identified. And dispensationalism did all of this even as its own narrative was simplified. For, as as the movement became increasingly popular, the eclectic variety that still characterised dispensational theology at the end of the nineteenth century gave way to a standardized norm.

Mediatizing dispensationalism

The standardization of dispensationalism was made possible by its wide dissemination, which in turn was made possible by its increasingly mediatized form. The new eschatology grew in popularity in part by means of fictional writing.[19] This trend illustrates how dispensational writers were pushing the boundaries of evangelical taste by attempting to communicate their faith to the broadest possible audience while expecting that these efforts would have small results. In the middle of the nineteenth century, evangelicals were deeply

[19] Gribben, *Writing the rapture.*

skeptical of the value and appropriateness of literary fiction. Edmund Gosse, who grew up in the middle part of the century in a Brethren household with strong prophetic predilections, and who later pursued a distinguished career as a literary critic, remembered that "storybooks" were "excluded from the family home."[20] This did not reflect any narrow sectarian culture: J. C. Ryle, the Church of England bishop of Liverpool, also denounced novels in his *Practical religion* (1878). But Brethren writers quickly recognized the value of fictional media as a means to communicate their ideas. H.R.K.'s *Life in the future* (?1879) may have been the first attempt to turn the dispensational narrative into fictional form.[21] Several decades later, prophecy fiction had established an audience outside the Brethren – and on both sides of the Atlantic. In 1901, a seriealised prophecy novel appeared in the German pietist journal, *Sabbathklänge*. This was followed in the USA by Joseph Birkbeck Burroughs' *Titan* (1905), Lutheran minister Milton H. Stine's *The devil's bride* (1910), and *Judgment day* (1910), by the Baptist clergyman Joshua Hill Foster. The most effective and enduring of these early writers of prophecy fiction was Sydney Watson, an Englishman committed to a non-denominational evangelicalism, whose trilogy, *Scarlet and purple* (1913), *The mark of the beast* (1915), and *In the twinkling of an eye* (1916), would remain in print through much of the ensuing century.[22]

The spread of dispensationalism

By then, of course, dispensationalism had been enunciated in its most enduring form in the *Scofield Reference Bible*, which was published in 1909 and in a revised edition in 1917, selling unknown tens of millions of copies for Oxford University Press. This study Bible widely disseminated a notions of rapture, tribulation and millennium. C. I. Scofield, editor of the

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[20] Edmund Gosse, *Father and son: A study of two temperaments* (1907; London: Penguin, 1989), p. 48.
[21] Gribben, "Rethinking the rise of prophecy fiction: H.R.K.'s *Life in the Future* (?1879)."
[22] Gribben, *Writing the rapture*, pp. 27-66.

annotated Bible, modified Darby's dispensationalism to offer a handbook that offered "helps at hard places, explanations of seeming discrepancies, and a new system of paragraphs" to confirm the dispensational view.[23] The title page of the new Bible confirmed that its consulting editors had been drawn from a trans-denominational network, representing an institution training Baptist students for the ministry, Crozer Theological Seminary, a Presbyterian institution, Xenia Theological Seminary, alongside the independent institutions Moody Bible Institute and the Toronto Bible Institute, and independent evangelical luminaries such as A. T. Pierson, who had succeeded C. H. Spurgeon as minister of the Baptist Metropolitan Tabernacle, London, and Arno C. Gaebelein, a prominent Methodist and prophecy writer.[24] Even as dispensational theory was associated with leaders from multiple denominations, this revolutionary view of the last things was identified as an essential component of conservative Protestantism. The incipient movement of conservative protestants found a new title after the publication of *The fundamentals* (1910-1915). Despite the fact that these booklets, circulated in the hundreds of thousands of copies, did not contain any chapters defending the new view of the end times, in the rapidly growing literary culture it supported, dispensationalism became firmly fixed as an essential component of what it meant to defend the faith. Dispensationalism came as close to achieving creedal status as was possible in anti-formal evangelical circles. In and after the 1920s, believers identified their "fundamentals of the faith" as historic Christian orthodoxy, in a theological sleight of hand that exchanged a sequence of slogans based on contemporary debates for the "form of sound words" contained in the ecumenical creeds and reformation confessions.

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[23] *Scofield Reference Bible* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1909), title page.
[24] See R. Todd Mangum and Mark S. Sweetnam, *The Scofield Bible: Its history and impact on the evangelical church* (Colorado Springs, CO: Paternoster, 2009), passim.

Most importantly, of course, dispensationalism spread in influence because it made sense. In 1917, the same year in which was published the second edition of Scofield's annotated Bible, political events seemed to confirm the expectations of many believers as to the eschatological significance of events in the middle east: General Allenby's capture of Jerusalem and the British government's issuing of the Balfour Declaration suggested that the Jewish homeland might soon be established, while the revolution in Russia confirmed the dangers of the "king of the north" and his godless armies. By the end of the 1910s, therefore, the utility of the new prophetic system had been confirmed.

Dispensational theology had been simplified within the Brethren movement in which it had first emerged. The emerging party of fundamentalists had adopted their prophetic system as a means by making sense of their view of the world and their relationship to what they regarded as increasingly liberal denominations. With a more careful popular touch, the multi-denominational movement of fundamentalists supported a literary culture that projected dispensational ideas to a wide audience and in accessible form. Readers who would struggle with the Latin articles in the Brethren *Bible Witness and Review* could access simplified versions of the same ideas in the expanding culture of print associated with the ideas of the *Scofield Reference Bible*. By the end of the 1910s, the varied and competing statements of dispensational ideas had given way to a standardized paradigm, as outlined in Scofield's work. This process of simplification and normalization of end-times ideas was both a cause and consequence of the increasing popularity of dispensational theology outside the Brethren movement. Evangelicals adopted the new end-of-the-world-view as it seemed to explain the apocalypse of the First World War, the British entry to Jerusalem, with its prospects of establishing a national home for the Jewish people, and the anarchy associated with the revolution in Russia. Ideas that had been developed in response to the declining fortunes of high-ranking Irish Anglicans were not being used to explain the geopolitical changes associated with an apocalyptic war. For many conservative

Protestants, dispensational theology had become a necessary foundation for a biblical worldview.

Conclusion

Many evangelicals accepted these claims to historical authenticity at face value – and a fast-growing media culture confirmed that move. Dispensational eschatology continued to evolve, being increasingly simplified, more often presented as lens into current affairs, within a less consistent narrative of despair and generating ever greater literary success. From mid-century, professors at Dallas Theological Seminary prepared many of the system's most thoughtful and articulate apologia, and media-friendly preachers, such as Billy Graham, used these arguments to articulate and make compelling their cultural and geopolitical concerns. The new prophetic creed explained the Cold War, with much else besides, and a growing number of believers were attracted by its clarity. Hal Lindsay demonstrated its crossover potential when *The late, great planet Earth* (1970) topped *The New York Times* bestseller list for non-fiction, accumulating sales of some 19 million units within its first decade. Lindsay developed the tropes and register that would characterize the next stage of the system's literary life, but his achievement was dwarfed by the sale of 65 million units of the *Left Behind* series of novels (1995-2007) and a sequence of thematically related cinematic and television releases. The effect of this cultural work has been revolutionary. Over the course of the last century, dispensational premillennialism has moved from the margins of popular Protestantism into the cultural mainstream, reaching beyond its core audience of around 100 million adherents, to be generally accepted as America's end of the world.