

*Presented at the Council on Dispensational Hermeneutics  
Shepherds Theological Seminary, September 20–21, 2023*

**Re-assessing the Extent of Darby's  
Influence on Dispensational Theology**

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*Abstract*

The name John Nelson Darby (1800–1882) has become synonymous with dispensationalism. He is widely touted as the inventor of the dispensational system of theology that was later advanced by C.I. Scofield (1843–1921) and afterwards Lewis Sperry Chafer (1871–1952). This idea has gone largely unchallenged by critics and proponents of dispensationalism, alike. However, a careful reading of Darby's theology compared against his dispensationally-minded predecessors, as well as his successors, yields surprising conflict with this popular narrative. This paper will demonstrate that the dispensational schemes of seventeenth and eighteenth century proto-dispensationalists such as French philosopher Pierre Poiret Naudé (1646–1719), English divine John Edwards (1637–1716), nonconformist minister and famous hymn-writer Isaac Watts (1674–1748), and the 1st Viscount John Shute Barrington (1678–1734), reflect greater parity with those of Scofield, Chafer and the generations of dispensational thinkers who would follow in their wake, rather than John Nelson Darby's. This paper will present conclusions drawn from my PhD research on John Nelson Darby conducted at Queens University Belfast's School of History, Anthropology, Philosophy and Politics under the direction of the department head, Crawford Gribben. It is therefore not yet published nor circulated in print until the degree for which this research has been conducted is awarded.

## *Introduction*

A careful reading of Darby's dispensational theology, over and against that of his dispensationally-minded predecessors, yields incontrovertible conflict with the popular narrative that Darby was the progenitor of a theologically robust dispensational arrangement of biblical history. Although this argument has been made before, it has met significant resistance, as it runs against the grain of a deep-seated and oft-repeated narrative that places Darby at the crown of the theological tradition known as pre-tribulational, dispensational-premillennialism. Inquiries into this thought tradition, to which Darby is unarguably and intrinsically linked, reveal that enthusiasts are encamped around every side of this issue, and that the resolve of its devoted adherents is rivalled only by the fervour of its impassioned opponents. However, when Darby is properly viewed against his historical and cultural backdrop, the context reveals that he is best understood in light of the continuum of ideas that captured the imaginations of nineteenth century Anglican-Evangelicals, and particularly the Anglo-Irish Protestant student population of Trinity College Dublin at a time when dissenting religious traditions were emerging in Dublin and its surrounding regions.

The argument that has not been previously advanced that will be presented in this paper is that the dispensational paradigm which Darby contrived, in fact, had little impact on the way dispensational thinkers after him came to understand God's successive dealings with mankind throughout biblical history. Thus, while Darby has been frequently cited by both adherents and detractors alike as a major influencer of the theological tradition known as dispensationalism, he almost certainly had less to do with the direct shaping of this system of religious thought than any have cared to take notice. It is more likely that the dispensational theology that came to dominate North American theology in the twentieth century did not stem directly from Darby's

arrangement of biblical history, but from that of his dispensationally-minded predecessors. The idea of Darby as the mastermind behind the dispensational arrangement of Scripture that emerged at the turn of the twentieth century deserves to be challenged on historical grounds.

### *Ruins in Darby's Dispensational Scheme*

Darby's concept of theological dispensations bore subtle differences from his dispensationally-minded predecessors. A principal distinctive was that judgment and ruin characterized each of the dispensations, and moreover that it similarly characterized the present economy of the Church. This is almost certainly because Darby's understanding of dispensations was informed by the Greek concept of the word from whence the English term is derived: *οικονόμ(οσ/ία)*. I have demonstrated elsewhere that the classical Greek meaning of the Greek word, transliterated *oikonomia*, was retained in the *Koine* usage during the second temple period when most of the New Testament was written.<sup>1</sup> For Darby, the term *oikonomia* would have been every bit as much, if not even more so, informed by its classical Greek usage than by how churchmen had come to use the term in its theological significance in previous centuries. Historian of systems of economic and political thought at Columbia University, Dotan Leshem, has provided an historiographic assessment on how the Ancient Greeks would have understood this term, free from its modern ecclesiastical usage.<sup>2</sup> He has elsewhere observed that it was the classical Greek historian-philosopher, Xenophon, (c. 435-354 B.C.) who was the first to define the term *oikonomia* as "the management and dispensation of a household,"<sup>3</sup> and assigned several

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<sup>1</sup> James I. Fazio "'Dispensation' Biblically Defined: A Consideration of the NT Usage of the Greek Term(s) *οικονόμ(οσ/ία)* in *Journal of Ministry and Theology*, Vol 23, Num 1 (Spring 2018): 58-83.

<sup>2</sup> Dotan Leshem, "What Did the Ancient Greeks Mean by *Oikonomia*?" in *Journal of Economic Perspectives*, 30, No. 1 (Winter 2016): 225-331.

<sup>3</sup> Leshem, "*Oikonomia* Redefined" in *Journal of the History of Economic Thought*, 35, No. 1 (March 2013): 43-61.

features which bear significance on how the term is employed in the Greek New Testament. Darby's familiarity with Xenophon and the Greek text of St Luke's Gospel would have informed Darby's concept of *oikonomia* alongside, if not prior to his introduction to its ecclesiastical usage—though certainly before his evangelical conversion. The significance of the classical Greek use of *oikonomia* to Darby's concept of dispensations is that the socio-historical context of the Greek term carries with it several ideas which are generally muddled, if not altogether lost in modern ecclesiastical usage. Luke's presentation of the teachings of Jesus which drew upon this Greek understanding of *oikonomia*, featured the responsibility of an appointed steward in relationship to his master's household and carried with it a certain expectation of judgment (Lk 12:40-48; 16:1-12). Moreover, the Greek concept of *oikonomia*, as it appears throughout Luke's Gospel, carries with it several distinct connotations: a master appoints a steward with a delegated stewardship that in turn governs the relationship between the two parties; the responsibility of the steward to the master will be called into account and judgment will be rendered based on the steward's faithfulness or lack thereof; and a subsequent stewardship will be appointed.<sup>4</sup>

Darby's interpretation of biblical-history reflected this Greek concept of *oikonomia*, such that the focus was not in the mere arrangement of the biblical narrative into successive epochs, but in terms of the stewardship and responsibility which God committed to man. Darby understood the Greek etymology of the word, and argued for its socio-historical meaning in a response to a literary critique that had been leveled at him by Francois Oliver in 1843. In defense of his ideas over against Mr. Oliver's, he wrote:

Economy, or dispensation, he says, means *law of the house*; but *economy* means nothing of the kind. It signifies the *administration of a house*; and, taken in an extended sense, it

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<sup>4</sup> Fazio, "'Dispensation' Biblically Defined", 64.

means any order of things that God has arranged, as when one says, animal economy, vegetable economy. It is true that the Greek word signifying ‘law’ is derived from the same root; but it is a derivation much more distant in meaning. *Nemo* means to distribute, divide, feed, etc.; and thus in a house there was a steward, and an economy—a man who arranged, distributed, provided for the family; and all the order which resulted from this was the *economy*, the *administration*, of the house. Thus, when God had established a certain order of things upon the earth, one has accustomed oneself, pretty correctly, as it appears to me, to call it an economy.<sup>5</sup>

Darby argued for an theological usage of the term that paralleled the socio-historical use of the word in its classical Greek context. He affirmed this idea by stating “the way in which it is used in the word of God is more strictly according to its original meaning, and contains rather the idea of an active administration. The word *dispensation* is often used thus, and it has the same etymological meaning.”<sup>6</sup>

As early as 1836, Darby disclosed his peculiar perspective on the arrangement of dispensations in “the Apostasy of the Successive Dispensations”, when he wrote: “The detail of the history of 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 on which he placed... responsibility in the hands of man.”<sup>7</sup> Yet, for Darby, the unmistakable pattern of the dispensations was that “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 at the outset.”<sup>8</sup>

Darby would later come to use the term: “rule of life” to describe the duties which God entrusted to mankind and the standard or measure by which man would be held accountable. He

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<sup>5</sup> CW 1:288-89.

<sup>6</sup> CW 1:289.

<sup>7</sup> CW 1:124.

<sup>8</sup> CW 1:125.

defined the rule of life in light of the duties which flow from the relationship one individual has with another—and with respect to the dispensations, how mankind stands in relationship to God:

The rule of life—what is it? Of what life? of mere man, or of man partaker of the divine nature? Of man subjectively responsible to meet a claim, or of man displaying the divine character? Are they the same? Was the conduct binding on Adam the same as that which was suitable to the place Christ held in the world? Which is our standard, if they are different? Such are some of the questions which arise when I enquire “What is the rule of life?” It is evident that duties as such flow from the relationship in which I find myself. A child’s duties are not a servant’s nor a wife’s. The duties of each, as of the parent or of the husband, flow from—and if rightly accomplished are the fulfillment of—what belongs to the place each is in. It is not a duty if one is not in the place.<sup>9</sup>

Darby maintained that a rule of life is defined by the duty that is associated with the relationship in which one finds himself. His application of this principal carried over into his understanding of biblical-history: “The rule of life for unfallen Adam was consistency with the innocent nature and place of blessing in which God had set him. He should have felt and walked in consistency with this.”<sup>10</sup> Following Adam’s failure in the garden, Darby perceived a subsequent rule of life that governed mankind:

To continue man’s subsequent history briefly and see what rule of life is before us in scripture—warnings, we know, were given, as by Enoch and Noah, but the scene after the fall ended in the flood. The power of evil in corruption was judged. For them the knowledge of God (brought with them from the beginning), conscience, the testimony of these prophets, with the witness of God in creation, was the rule by which they would be judged.<sup>11</sup>

Darby perceived one rule of life which governed Adam during his state of innocence, in the garden, and a second rule of life which governed his descendants afterward, which he identified as “conscience.” While this same span of time has factored into many ecclesiastical arrangements of dispensationalists as the first two dispensations, Darby didn’t see the

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<sup>9</sup> CW 10:169.

<sup>10</sup> CW 10:177.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

relationship between God and man in these early epochs as properly meeting the necessary criteria to constitute them theological dispensations. Darby expressed this in 1836 when he wrote: “the paradisaical state cannot properly perhaps be called a dispensation in this sense of the word; but as regards its universal failure of man, it is a most important issue.”<sup>12</sup> Nevertheless, Darby perceived of a clear judgment with the flood of Noah’s day which established a new rule of life on the basis of human government, which did constitute a dispensation: “evil became insupportable: the deluge put an end to it. After this event—this judgment of God, a new world began, and the principle of government was introduced. He who should kill a man should himself be put to death.”<sup>13</sup> Because God would begin to relate to man on the basis of government, Darby resolved that after the flood, “here dispensations, properly speaking, begin.”<sup>14</sup>

The rule of life which characterized Noah’s responsibility before God was human government, and that rule of life would remain up until, and even through the establishment of the Messianic kingdom in the fullness of times when “the government will be upon His shoulders” (Isa 9:6). Therefore, this rule of life would not cease, though God would afterward introduce a new rule of life with Abraham: “So with Abraham: the revelations God made to him of himself, realized by faith, would form the guide and rule of his conduct... Conscience surely was there, but the original and constant revelations of God impressed their character on his walk of faith.”<sup>15</sup> For Darby, the calling of Abraham coupled with his response by faith, was critical in the unfolding of the divine narrative. Darby considers God’s call of Abraham as introducing

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<sup>12</sup> *CW* 1:125.

<sup>13</sup> *CW* 22:340.

<sup>14</sup> *CW* 1:125.

<sup>15</sup> *CW* 10:177.

“another principle of great importance,”<sup>16</sup> in so much as the relationship between God and Abraham constitutes a distinguishable principle in God’s dealings with humanity on the basis of faith.

Huebner has argued that in Darby’s reckoning, “the call of God, however, does not constitute a dispensation of promise,”<sup>17</sup> though speaking to God’s dealing with Abraham on the basis of promise, Darby clearly identified that “the *calling of God* is a cardinal point in His dispensations.”<sup>18</sup> Moreover, Darby acknowledged that “with Abraham: the revelations God made to him of Himself, realized by faith, would form the guide and rule of his conduct.” Thus, Darby would see this as a guiding principle that governed not only Abraham’s relationship to God, but all those who would follow in faith: “Now Abraham, being called, became the stock of a race which was to inherit the promises outside the world.”<sup>19</sup> Darby, therefore sees the call of Abraham as introducing a new rule of life, particularly as it concerns the unconditional nature of the covenant which God made with him (Gen 15). This new rule of life stood in contrast to that which governed Noah: “As regards this part of the history previous to Abram (that is, the earth under government), we have the fact recorded of the division of the earth amongst its various nations and families...”<sup>20</sup> In other words, Darby saw a distinction between the rule of life which governed Abraham and that which preceded him, with Noah. What is important to distinguish here, is that in Darby’s understanding, the dispensation of Noah did not cease with the calling of Abraham, “but although circumstances were thus altered, the principle of government remained

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<sup>16</sup> CW 22:341.

<sup>17</sup> Huebner, *J. N. Darby’s Teaching Regarding Dispensations, Ages, Administrations, and the Two Parentheses* (Jackson, NJ: Present Truth Publishers, 1993), 28.

<sup>18</sup> CW 19:122.

<sup>19</sup> CW 22:341.

<sup>20</sup> CW 19:123.



untouched.”<sup>21</sup> The basis of God’s dealing with man on the basis of government was still in effect, however, that rule of life had failed to produce in mankind that which God was after. Therefore, leaving the dispensation of government in effect for all of mankind, God introduced a new principle upon which to deal with a derivative of mankind—a called out people, even a nation.

Darby made a nuanced distinction between “the estate or condition in the dispensation” and “the conduct of faith in it.”<sup>22</sup> He would apply this same principle to his understanding of “the state and condition of the church.”<sup>23</sup> However, Darby regarded the prevailing principles which governed Noah and Abraham’s calling as utterly distinct:

In Noah’s time there was government of the earth, and God coming in judgment and committing the right of the sword to man. After this comes the call of Abraham. Mark: the principle of government is not put forward by the word, but the principle of promise, and the call to be in relationship with God, of that one person who becomes the root of all the promises of God—Abraham, the father of the faithful... After that, among the descendants of Abraham, by this same principle of election, God takes the children of Jacob to be His people here below... Israel was the called, separated people—separated indeed only to earthly blessings, and to enjoy the promise; but at the same time, to be subject to the exercise of the government of God according to law. We say then, that in Noah was marked the principle of government of the earth, and in Abraham that of calling and election.<sup>24</sup>

Darby therefore contrasted the principle of government with the principle of calling, and yet, each of these relationships were similarly characterized by failure: “A darker picture now remains—the actual practical conduct and condition. There was a famine in the land, and Abram went down into Egypt. This was not confidence in God, who had brought him thither, nor was the land of Egypt the land of Canaan.”<sup>25</sup> Thus, Abraham’s calling according to promise was no less marred by failure, even as Adam’s relationship to God according to innocence was marked

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<sup>21</sup> *CW* 19:124.

<sup>22</sup> *CW* 19:129-30.

<sup>23</sup> *CW* 19:129.

<sup>24</sup> *CW* 2:375.

<sup>25</sup> *CW* 19:129.

by the Fall, and the succeeding character upon the earth, according to conscience was one of ruin leading to judgment.

Thus, God provided a new dispensation, with a new governing rule of life, as well as a new calling. This calling did not supplant God's calling of Abraham, neither did it supplant the government God had established through Noah, though there was a new prevailing principle in God's giving of the Mosaic Law to the nation of Israel. According to Darby, "In Noah and Abraham we had them distinct; government in the one, calling in the other... In the Jews, the two things were united, namely the calling of God, and government upon the earth."<sup>26</sup> As for the failure of Israel's dispensation, as Darby understood it, that is a matter that I establish elsewhere in my thesis. Put succinctly, in Darby's own words "Israel failed, and ceased thenceforward to be capable of manifesting the principle of the government of God, because God in Israel acted in righteousness; and unrighteous Israel could no longer be the depository of the power of God."<sup>27</sup> However, in a manner quite distinct from his dispensationally-minded predecessors, Darby observed a governmental transference to the Gentiles, quite distinct from God's calling of the church. In other words, Darby perceived a separation between government and calling, following God's judgment of Israel. This would stand as a critical distinction in Darby's concept of the church's heavenly nature and character.

Ultimately, Darby regarded a transference of government to the Gentiles: "as to government, God transports it where He will; and it went to the Gentiles" though he would make the point clear that "the calling of God for the earth is never transferred to the nations; it remains with the Jews."<sup>28</sup> Moreover, the government which transferred to the Gentiles did so entirely

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<sup>26</sup> CW 2:377.

<sup>27</sup> CW 2:377.

<sup>28</sup> CW 2:378.

apart from the church, rather it was the transference to the nations via Nebuchadnezzar and the kingdoms depicted in the great image of Daniel's prophecy (Dan 2:30-33).<sup>29</sup> Darby makes this point evident in the following explanation:

What has happened to the nations by their having had government given over to them? They have become 'beasts': so the four great monarchies are called. Once the government is transferred to the Gentiles, they become the oppressors of the people of God: first the Babylonians; secondly the Medes and Persians; thirdly the Greeks; then, the Romans.<sup>30</sup>

Herein, their failure is manifest, and the words of God's judgment is spelled out, as though scrawled by God's own hand above their heads: "*Mene, mene tekel upharsin.*" Darby thus concluded: "Gentile power is in a fallen state, even as the called people, the Jews, are."<sup>31</sup>

In Darby's estimation, there was a transition in economy that remains quite distinct from the transition of government to the Gentiles. The calling of God's earthly people remained with Israel, despite the transfer of government to the Gentile nations. This governmental transference to the Gentiles is also perceived in the teaching of Jesus, as evidenced in Luke's Gospel, which states that Israel "will fall by the edge of the sword, and be led away captive into all nations. And Jerusalem will be trampled by Gentiles until the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled" (Lk 21:24). However, independent of this transition in government, Darby perceived a transition from the "Jewish economy" to "the present economy."<sup>32</sup> Darby would distinguish between these two economies in this regard: "The church is something altogether apart—a kind of heavenly economy, during the rejection of the earthly people, who are put aside on account of their sins, and driven out among the nations."<sup>33</sup> Thus, whereas Darby considered the convergence of both

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<sup>29</sup> CW 25:244.

<sup>30</sup> CW 2:378.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> CW 1:289.

<sup>33</sup> CW 2:376.

principles of government and the calling of God in the Jewish dispensation, he did not regard the present economy to share the same character. Rather, he maintained:

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>34</sup>

Darby therefore regarded the present economy as a parenthesis in God's dealings with the earthly peoples (both the Jewish and the Gentiles). He would call attention to this distinction in 1850 by saying: "this present time is called (not I judge a dispensation, but) a parenthesis."<sup>35</sup> This expression of Darby's, whereby he called the present dispensation "not a dispensation" can give rise to some confusion.<sup>36</sup> However, the distinction he makes here is to emphasize that God's dealing with the Church as his heavenly people in the present dispensation is not the same as God's dealings with Israel as God's earthly people. His expression here does not at all represent the totality of Darby's frequent reference to the present dispensation of the church. Even writing in 1843, Darby expressed the following: "the time which elapses from the seed-sowing til the harvest is what is generally called *the present dispensation*. I have called it "the church dispensation, because it is the time during which the church is called, and exists here below, in contrast with the Jews and the legal system."<sup>37</sup>

Throughout the *Collected Writings*, alone, the phrase "present dispensation" occurs over 100 times, all of them in reference to the church economy. Why then, make this distinction? Because Darby understood the basis of God's present dealings with the Gentiles to occur within

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<sup>34</sup> CW 25:244.

<sup>35</sup> CW 13:155.

<sup>36</sup> Below it will be demonstrated that this distinction likely arose as a reaction to Newton's use of the expression in 1843, for which Darby castigated him in 1844, thus requiring Darby to articulate a more nuanced definition of the term.

<sup>37</sup> CW 1:289.

the larger Jewish dispensation, which has not yet reached its fulfillment. For Darby, God's resolution with the peoples of the earth (Jews and Gentiles) would be resolved in a coming seven-year period of tribulation, with which the church would not participate. He explained his reasoning on the basis of Daniel's Seventy Weeks prophecy, when he wrote: "another reason why it has been called so, and proof that it is so, is, that sixty-nine of Daniel's weeks are run out, and then there is an interval of ages, and the last week begins again to run on and be counted."<sup>38</sup> Thus, he regarded the Church as not a dispensation, properly speaking, but as a parenthesis amidst the dispensations. Nevertheless, the present economy of the church was no less exempt from the ever-present principle of ruin that distinguished each economy of God's dealings with man, throughout all of biblical history. For Darby, all dispensations, economies, and administrations, are fulfilled in the coming dispensation of the fullness of times, wherein the Messianic rule will govern over all the kingdoms of the earth, and where Israel, the Gentiles, and the church, will be governed under the ruling principle that issues from the Seat of David in Jerusalem. Darby would see this period as the fulfillment of God's dealings with the Jews and the Gentiles: "blessing to the Gentiles will be the consequence of the restoration of the Jews, and of the presence of the Lord."<sup>39</sup> This future heavenly dispensation, realized upon the earth, would serve as the present hope of the church of God.

#### *Darby's Impact on Modern Dispensational Theology*

The name John Nelson Darby (1800–1882) has become synonymous with dispensationalism. He has been widely touted as the mind behind the dispensational system of theology, and the pre-cursor to Cyrus Ingerson Scofield (1843–1921), of whom it's been said

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<sup>38</sup> CW 13:155.

<sup>39</sup> CW 2:381.

that he later popularized “Darby’s” dispensational scheme of biblical history. While it may be true that Scofield is largely responsible for the proliferation of dispensational theology in churches across North America, the link between Darby and Scofield is tenuous, at best.<sup>40</sup> Nevertheless, many have persisted in chasing down what they perceive as the “missing link” between these two dispensationally-minded churchmen.<sup>41</sup>

However, if more attention were paid to the reading of Darby it would become evident that Darby’s dispensational understanding of biblical history is minimally reflected in Scofield’s dispensationalism. The commentary provided in Scofield’s Reference Bible<sup>42</sup> and reflected elsewhere in his writings,<sup>43</sup> does not bear those distinct characteristics which Darby settled upon concerning the unique features of biblical dispensations. To trace even an indirect line, from Darby to Scofield may be to press the matter further than one can responsibly go and could even be said to run contrary to what the evidence can support. Larry Crutchfield has strongly asserted: “if there is one assertion that begs refutation it is that Scofield and those who followed him

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<sup>40</sup> Larry Crutchfield raised this criticism in *The Origins of Dispensationalism: the Darby Factor* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1992).

<sup>41</sup> The American Presbyterian minister James Hall Brookes (1830-1897) has been suggested as a possible link connecting the thought of Darby and Scofield, Cf. Carl E. Sanders II, *The Premillennial Faith of James Brookes: Reexamining the Roots of American Dispensationalism* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2001), 28-35; Cf. Todd Mangum and Mark S. Sweetnam, *The Scofield Bible: Its History and Impact on the Evangelical Church* (Colorado Springs, CO: Paternoster, 2009), 76-83. Mangum and Sweetnam, as well as Crutchfield have also considered the possibility of Arno C. Gaebelin as a link between Darby and Scofield, *The Scofield Bible*, 86-89; *The Origins of Dispensationalism*, 207, 212. Furthermore, Huebner has called attention to Walter Scott, as a possible connection, citing the fact that Scott is acknowledged in the introduction to the Scofield Reference Bible; *J.N. Darby’s Teaching*, 97.

<sup>42</sup> The Scofield Reference Bible was the first mass-marketed English Study Bible, making it a go-to option for many Bible-toting Church-goers across the United States, influenced millions of Evangelical Protestants to adopt a form of dispensational theology. The best evaluation of the content and influence of Scofield’s writings to date is Mangum and Sweetnam’s, *The Scofield Bible*.

<sup>43</sup> Scofield’s theology is expressed across a series of several booklets, including: Cyrus I. Scofield, *Rightly Dividing the Word of Truth* (Findlay, OH: Dunham Publishing Co., 1888); *Plain Papers on the Holy Spirit* (New York: Fleming H. Revell Co., 1899); *Prophecy Made Plain* (Glasgow: Pickering and Inglis, 1914); *Dr. C.I. Scofield’s Question Box* (Chicago, IL: Bible Institute Colportage Ass’n, 1917); *In Many Pulpits with Dr. C.I. Scofield* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1922).

borrowed wholesale—jot and tittle—from Darby.”<sup>44</sup> Though it cannot be denied that both men were occupied with similar thoughts concerning the nature of the church and its relationship to Israel and the coming dispensation, it seems far more likely that both men were drawing from a similar pool, or as Crutchfield has illustratively put it: “if Scofield robbed Darby’s treasuries, he took his dispensational diadem and melted it down and cast it as something quite different from the original.”<sup>45</sup> Mangum and Sweetnam have come out and cited Scofield’s dispensational arrangement as an “original contribution” and “an area where he was happy to deviate from Darby.”<sup>46</sup> However commendable their acknowledgement of the disparity between these two dispensational schemes may be, they go too far to laud Scofield for the originality in his dispensational arrangement.

Prominent twentieth century American theologian, Charles Ryrie, observed that Scofield’s dispensational arrangement parroted that of Isaac Watts more than it did Darby’s.<sup>47</sup> Moreover, he affirmed that “Darby’s teachings... was obviously not the pattern Scofield followed. If Scofield parroted anybody’s scheme, it was Watts’s, not Darby’s.”<sup>48</sup> Scott Aniol has compared Scofield’s dispensational scheme to that of Isaac Watts’, and has rightly concluded that “like the dispensationalist, Watts sees progressive stages in the outworking of God’s plan in the world. But Watts understands that plan much differently than the dispensationalist.”<sup>49</sup> This should come as no surprise, as Watts failed to acknowledge a distinct future dispensation of the fulness of times, which serves as an indispensable element to dispensational-premillennialism.

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<sup>44</sup> Crutchfield, 206.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> Mangum and Sweetnam, 144.

<sup>47</sup> Charles C. Ryrie, *Dispensationalism* (Chicago, IL: Moody Publishers, 2007), 76-77.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 79.

<sup>49</sup> Scott Aniol, “Was Isaac Watts a Proto-Dispensationalist?” in *Detroit Baptist Seminary Journal*, 16 (2011), 18.

Without the concept of the coming kingdom, Watts' dispensational arrangement of history cannot be considered the forerunner for American dispensationalism. Even the post-millennialism of Richard Graves accounted for the future dispensation of the fulness of times, though it did not account for as elaborate arrangement of the former dealings of God with man arranged according to economies or administrations. However, the orderly arrangement of the dispensations as they were presented in 1687 by Pierre Poiret Naudé's *Économie Divine*,<sup>50</sup> by John Edwards' *A Compleat History or Survey of all the Dispensations*,<sup>51</sup> or in 1728 by John Barrington Shute's *An Essay on the Several Dispensations of God*,<sup>52</sup> may be seen to parallel Scofield's dispensations a bit more closely. The dispensational arrangements of biblical history into seven successive epochs was not uncharacteristic in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. However, this was not the pattern which Darby perceived in the biblical text.

While Darby acknowledged the successive unfolding of economies by which God related to man, as they had been understood down through ecclesiastical history, he perceived of the dispensations in a manner that was informed by the classic Greek concept of *oikonomia*. This concept of responsibility, testing, and judgment, is apparent in Darby's concept of the dispensations, as well as Scofield's. The mere arrangement of biblical history into dispensations has this feature built into it, as noted by so many other dispensational thinkers in the seventeenth

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<sup>50</sup> Besides his comparable arrangement of the previous dispensations, Pierre Poiret had a clear expectation of a future restored state on the earth when the saints of God will reign with Christ in glorified bodies, *The Divine Economy: Or, an Universal System of the Works and Purposes of God Towards Men, Demonstrated* (London: 1713), 1:370-73.

<sup>51</sup> John Edwards, *ΠΟΛΥΠΟΙΚΙΛΟΣ ΣΟΦΙΑ, A Compleat History or Survey of all the Dispensations and Methods of Religion, from the beginning of the World to the Consummation of all things; As represented in the Old and New Testament* (1699), 2 Vols.

<sup>52</sup> Among these three examples, John Shute Barrington elaborated most sparingly on his anticipation of the character of the millennial age, though he spoke of "the kingdom of the Messiah, the Son of David, in the age to come," and elsewhere cited Christ's "coming again the second time into the world, as Mr. Fos. Mede, and some other of the millenary writers think, it is agreeable to those texts, which speak of his coming again with the angels as obeying his commands, *Mat. xxiv.30,31.* and with all other inconceivable power, pomp and glory." *An Essay on the Several Dispensations of God to Mankind as they lye in the Bible* (London, 1728), 62, 153



and eighteenth centuries.<sup>53</sup> Built into this idea of a dispensation is the concept of the administration of household affairs, and is always coupled with the idea of judgment in the Greek Scriptures. Darby acknowledged this point, when he wrote in 1840 “every dispensation has some special deposit, so to speak, entrusted to it, by which its fidelity is tried. And, as it seems to me, every one of them will be made good, and God glorified in them, in Jesus, on the proved failure of man in each.”<sup>54</sup> Like the host of dispensational thinkers which preceded him, Scofield no less included concepts of testing and judgment in his arrangement of the successive economies of God. Scofield would even go so far as to define a dispensation as: “a period of time during which man is tested in respect to some *specific* revelation of the will of God. Seven such dispensations are distinguished in Scripture.”<sup>55</sup> Thus, Scofield defined the dispensations with respect to responsibility, testing and judgement, and saw each of these features as integral to his dispensational arrangement. Despite these similarities, Scofield and Darby perceived of the dispensations quite differently.

Scofield’s understanding of the testing and judgment of the dispensations only superficially paralleled Darby’s. It remains unclear whether this is because, like so many others who have cited Darby’s dispensationalism, Scofield did not read Darby closely enough to notice the peculiarities expressed therein, concerning God’s rule of law with respect to the administrations of man, or simply because he did not directly receive his dispensational understanding from Darby. Regardless, the two expressed distinctly different ideas. Scofield suggested that each dispensation ended in failure, as the protracted outcome of the test by which God proved mankind. In the case of the church, this would “eventually” become manifest “as

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<sup>53</sup> Barrington, 62-73.

<sup>54</sup> *CW* 1:114.

<sup>55</sup> *The Scofield Reference Bible*, note on Gen 1:27.

world affairs grow more wicked, few will accept Christ, thus provoking God to judge the earth in the great tribulation.”<sup>56</sup> This idea stands apart from Darby’s concept of the ruin of the church, which he articulated in 1840 pronouncing the ruinsim as he found it in the church: “the dispensation is in ruins, and in a condition of entire departure from its original standing.”<sup>57</sup> For Darby, each dispensation was marked by failure from the outset.

Darby perceived failure as an integral part of the present dispensation, no differently than in previous dispensations: “the world, at the time of Noah and of Lot, was in a fallen, ruined state... the state of things then existing was one of ruin, although there were faithful persons. It may be called economy, dispensation, what you please.”<sup>58</sup> To no less degree, Darby saw two principles at work in the present dispensation, one in the operation of the Spirit, and the other in the operation of Satan. Writing in 1840, Darby articulated these two principles: “In the word of God we see two great mysteries, which develop themselves during the present dispensation: the mystery of Christ and the mystery of lawlessness.”<sup>59</sup> Ruin was an ever-present condition which marked the dispensation, whereas apostasy and a future “cutting off” would mark the judgment of God upon the dispensation. For Darby, these were two different factors at play, the former being the manifestation of an evil disposition toward God, and the latter the manifestation of God’s judgment. The dispensation would persist in its ruinous state until the judgment of God at last falls upon the church.

Is not that the ruin of the dispensation, the manifestation of an apostasy, the principles of which were already at work in the apostle’s time, and only waited till that which restrained was taken out of the way, to manifest themselves in the lawless one? The author says that this does not prove that the dispensation is closed. I do not believe that it is closed, and I have not said so; but it reveals the ruin of the dispensation—a ruin, the

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<sup>56</sup> Mangum and Sweetnam, 129.

<sup>57</sup> *CW* 1:144.

<sup>58</sup> *CW* 1:174.

<sup>59</sup> *CW* 1:175.

instrument of which was already at work, and which ends in apostasy and in judgment.<sup>60</sup>

Darby's departure from the dispensationalism of Scofield and other dispensational thinkers, which preceded or followed him, is that Darby's concept of the church formed a parenthetical in God's dealing with the Gentiles. Moreover, God's dealing with the Gentiles was, itself, a parenthetical to God's dealing with Israel. Therefore, Darby conceived of concentric dispensations. Put another way, Darby regarded dispensations within dispensations. This is not the language that Darby used, however, the implications are certainly present. The Jewish dispensation, which was marked by ruin from the outset, with the worship of the golden calf,<sup>61</sup> has been temporarily set aside, and though it has persisted in a state of ruin for centuries, its conclusive judgment lies ahead, in the seven-year tribulation, which he called "the times of Jacob's trouble."<sup>62</sup> This very same eschatological event would also mark God's judgment upon the Gentiles, thus, the seven-year tribulation serve as the conclusive act whereby God "cutting off the nations."<sup>63</sup>

However, as early as 1831, as Darby was grappling with the idea of the pre-tribulational rapture of the church—moreover, he was resistant to Rev. Robert Daly's mention of the idea at the prophecy conference held at the Powerscourt Estate<sup>64</sup>—he was not altogether ignorant of the Scriptural pattern of "gathering out the remnant before the judgments."<sup>65</sup> Thus, during these early formative years (1830-32), Darby held to something akin to a "partial rapture" theory,<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> *CW* 1:174-75.

<sup>61</sup> *CW* 5:84.

<sup>62</sup> *CW* 5:243.

<sup>63</sup> *CW* 2:96.

<sup>64</sup> This is a point which I covered elsewhere in the .

<sup>65</sup> *CW* 2:97.

<sup>66</sup> The idea of a "partial rapture" was later adopted several Darby enthusiasts who followed in the tradition of the "Open Brethren," such as Robert Govett (1813-1901), George. H. Pember (1837-1910), George. H. Lang (1874-1958), etc. The concept included a rescue for a handful—the preferred term us usually "remnant"—of faithful

whereby God would rescue his faithful ones out from the judgment that would befall the entire earth, including the Jews, the Gentiles, and the Church. In 1831, Darby expressed his ideas of the judgment which would befall the present dispensation in a treatise titled: “Evidence from Scripture of the Passing Away of the Present Dispensation,” wherein he writes: “this dispensation inherits judgment, not the world; is itself to be cut off, not to be the system of the world’s blessing... the church must shew that it has *continued* in God’s goodness, or else it must admit the conclusion, it shall be cut off, save repentance evert it”<sup>67</sup> and yet, Darby closes the possibility of any such aversion stating “there is no instance of the renewal of a dispensation which had declined away and departed from its God.”<sup>68</sup> At that time, as Darby was still formulating his dispensational understanding of God’s judgment upon the church, he concluded: “the church is hiding the present judgment of itself from its eyes, that God’s judgments, are upon the church in warning, and they will not hear; and therefore they will be cut off if they repent not.”<sup>69</sup> However, Darby would soon come to see the present dispensation differently, and thus the coming judgment of the seven-year tribulation would befall the Gentile Nations, rather than to the church. A point he would vociferously argue, in later years, when Benjamin W. Newton would advance ideas very similar to Darby’s own nascent understanding of the dispensations.<sup>70</sup>

In a harsh criticism of Newton’s *Thoughts on the Apocalypse*,<sup>71</sup> Darby strongly opposed Newton’s use of the term “dispensation” as applied to the church.<sup>72</sup> Yet Newton used the term

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believers out from among the general population of Christians to endure the tribulation, along with the Jews and Gentiles.

<sup>67</sup> *CW* 2:97.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>69</sup> *CW* 2:119.

<sup>70</sup> Darby’s harsh critique of Benjamin Newton’s *Thoughts on the Apocalypse* reflects the development of Darby’s thought away from the earlier position which he held, and which likely formed a kinship between the two men in the early 1830s and thereafter grew increasingly strained after 1833. *CW* 8:1-320.

<sup>71</sup> Benjamin Willis Newton, *Thoughts on the Apocalypse* (London: Houlston and Sons, 1843).

<sup>72</sup> *CW* 8:4-8.

dispensation to reference the church, in much the same way as Scofield and other modern dispensationalists afterward would conceive of the terms. Darby's response in 1844 was as follows:

It may be remarked that the writer defines very distinctly his idea of the limits and character of the two dispensations which he has in his mind; "that in which Christ is seated at the right hand of God, secretly exercising the power of God's throne;" and, "that in which He will come forth in the exercise of the power of His own peculiar kingdom." The first of these two is to him identical with "the church dispensation."

I must beg the reader's pardon, if I often take notice of statements which appear to me inaccurate, even when they are not very important <sup>73</sup>

In other words, Darby differed with Newton's use of the term dispensation, that implied that the present Church dispensation was succeeded by a future Millennial dispensation, on account of the fact that it did not allow for the resolution of the Jewish dispensations and the times of the Gentiles, which would occur concurrently in the seven-year tribulation. Though Darby did not previously object to this language, here he demonstratively protested, because of the implications that resulted, namely, that the church was seen to participate with the Jews and the Gentiles in the seven-year tribulation. It was therefore, Darby's concept of the nature of the church that informed his eschatology. More precisely, it was his concept of ruinism, applied to the church, that formulated the nuances that he would come to embrace in his dispensational reading of Scripture—an understanding that has been minimally understood and generally neglected, no less by those of whom it has been said that they follow in Darby dispensational tradition.

### *Conclusion*

In the past century and a half, since his passing, hundreds of biographical treatments related to the life and impact of John Nelson Darby have flooded the shelves. In the past decade

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<sup>73</sup> CW 8:5.

alone, dozens of titles have been released by some of the world's leading publishing houses, all with the intent of painting a picture of this inscrutable Anglo-Irish ecclesiastical separatist who remains as unknown today as ever. Paradoxically, Darby remains the victim of cruel caricaturisation at the hands of his critics, and fanciful fictionalization by his admirers, while also managing to go virtually unnoticed by all but the most ardent inquisitors. That one can be introduced as one of “the four most influential (post-biblical) figures in the formation of present-day Protestantism”<sup>74</sup> while simultaneously being lambasted as a narcissistic self-deluded madman and a charlatan<sup>75</sup> is the singular distinction of the enigma that is J. N. Darby. Yet somehow, even after so many years, books are being written that condemn his dispensational scheme, while fundamentally misapprehending and mischaracterizing it.<sup>76</sup>

However, the fact that Darby remains largely misread and misunderstood at the present is must be held against his own account. Had he been more lucid in his literary expression and had more care and organization been taken in the compilation of his body of literature, his intellectual tradition would have been far more accessible. Though more than a century removed, the assessment of Darby offered by William Neatby seems every bit as poignant today as it was when he first expressed it: “the style of his writing to the reader of today seems half ludicrous, half disgusting. This peculiarity is almost fatal to abiding influence.”<sup>77</sup> Despite this fact, Darby

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<sup>74</sup> Donald Harman Akenson. *Discovering the End of Time: Irish Evangelicals in the Age of Daniel O'Connell* (Montréal; Kingston; London; Chicago: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2016), 3.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, 249-53.

<sup>76</sup> Besides criticizing Darby for conceiving of seven dispensations, Akenson has mistakenly accused him of conceiving of the coming dispensation as one which commences with the rapture of the church—the very same notion that Darby repudiated in his critique of Newton. Moreover, Akenson suggested that Darby has not accounted for “the rapture and following events” referring to the seven-year tribulation period, which Darby understood as the resolution of the Jewish dispensation and the times of the Gentiles, for which he took special labors to identify the times of the Gentiles and the present economy as two sets of parenthetical administrations within the broader Jewish dispensation.

<sup>77</sup> William Blair Neatby, *A History of the Plymouth Brethren* (London: Hodder and Stouton, 1901), 49.

has beaten the odds and has somehow managed to remain relevant today, even as his ideas abide in the consciousness of many Evangelicals, albeit partially conceived. Darby's dispensational premillennialism has made an indelible impact on the Protestant world, and arguably, on present day political affairs on a global scale.<sup>78</sup> However, as it has been shown here, Darby's eschatology emerged out from his ecclesiology, the governing principle of which was the ruinism whereby he conceived of the dispensational arrangement of biblical history. To the extent that Evangelical Christianity maintains a form of dispensational premillennialism, it is probably better understood in the Platonic sense of shadows dancing on the cave wall, rather than a direct product of Darby's robust and inscrutable intellectual tradition.

The point has been shown that Darby was not a theological innovator, nor was it ever his aim to be. Though it would not be wrong to think of him as an ecclesiastical maverick. Darby did not desire to pioneer a new path, but to uncover and indeed, embody the ideals of the primitive church, as he understood it from the writings of the apostles. He embodied the Reformed principle of *semper reformanda* "always reforming."<sup>79</sup> In the same sense as the 17<sup>th</sup> century Dutch Reformers who coined the term, Darby did not pursue theological novelty, but sought to evaluate the tradition that had been passed down through the centuries, on the basis of his understanding of the thoughts expressed throughout the Christian Scriptures. Ruinism emerged

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<sup>78</sup> The question concerning the extent to which Darby's eschatological ideas influenced the establishment of the modern state of Israel has given rise to numerous books: Paul Richard Wilkinson, *For Zion's Sake: Christian Zionism and the Role of John Nelson Darby* (Colorado Springs, CO: Paternoster, 2007), afterwards reprinted as *Understanding Christian Zionism: Israel's Place in the Purposes of God* (Bend, OR: Berean Call, 2013); Gerald R. McDermott, ed. *The New Christian Zionism: Fresh Perspectives on Israel & the Land* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2016).

<sup>79</sup> This Latin phrase, meaning "always reforming," has been attributed to the Utrecht theologian Johannes Hoornbeeck (1617-1666), and was intended to mimic the cry of the reformation solas: *sola scriptura, solus Christus, sola fide, sola gratia, soli Deo gloria*. It specifically suggests that the church is not called merely to be "Reformed," but that the work of reformation must necessarily continue into each generation: *ecclesia reformata, semper reformanda*. T. Brienens, et al., *De Nadere Reformatie* (The Hague: Book Centre, 1986), 93.

as a prominent theme throughout the biblical record, from the fall of Adam, throughout the lives of the Patriarchs, the history of Israel, and down through the succession of Gentile nations.

Ruinism no less defined the church's present condition as well its future apostasy and, and would moreover characterize the great judgment that is anticipated to follow the church's departure.

Ruinism informed Darby's eschatology and governed his dispensational arrangement of biblical history. While many of these implications of Darby's intellectual tradition have become fixtures of Evangelical thought, the ruinism from which they emerged never found a foothold into

Protestantism. Yet ruinism, more than any of these other points, can be uniquely pointed to as Darby's original contribution to dispensational premillennialism—a contribution that remains unrealized in Protestant Christianity.



