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**100 Years before Darby:
A Survey of the Several Dispensations of John Shute Barrington (1678–1734)**

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Abstract

For the past two centuries, ecclesiastical historians and theologians have cited the Anglo-Irish clergyman and Plymouth Brethren pioneer, John Nelson Darby (1800–1882) as the intellectual architect behind the arrangement of history into seven dispensations. However, more than a century before Darby presented his dispensational schema the First Viscount John Shute Barrington (1678–1734) offered a dispensational arrangement of redemptive history that outlined God’s relationship to the different peoples of God, as he perceived them from Scripture. Barrington recognized several differing dispensations beginning with Adam in innocence and continuing through the antediluvian patriarchs, as well as with Noah, Abraham, and Moses. Moreover, he made a clear delineation between National Israel as God’s earthly people and the Church as God’s heavenly people. Finally, Barrington’s eschatological expectations anticipated a future restoration of Israel to their land as the resolution of God’s earthly Kingdom, prior to the culmination of all of God’s dispensations. Barrington’s dispensational arrangement of redemptive history as presented in *An Essay on the Several Dispensations of God to Mankind, in the Order, in which they lie in the Bible* (1728) repudiates the claim that Darby was the innovative architect behind the septarian arrangement of the Bible’s dispensations that were later advanced in the *Scotfield Reference Bible* (1909).

Introduction

For all its popularity—or perhaps the term “infamy” should be preferred—dispensationalism remains among the most misunderstood theological frameworks and certainly among the most underrepresented voices in the academy. Despite the extent of its adoption by North American Christianity and its pervasive influence on the Evangelical psyche, dispensationalism remains the victim of frequent mischaracterization. Most recently this was evidenced in a segment on Tucker Carlson that aired on July 16, 2024. In an interview that has received millions of views in the last two months, country music entertainer John Rich asserted a conspiratorial link between John Nelson Darby and the Rothschild family.¹ Yet, dispensational mischaracterization extends beyond social media segments and YouTube programing. In a new title, released just last year by Lexham Press, John Nelson Darby is unreservedly touted as “the founder of dispensationalism”² whose “division of world history into dispensations (economies or ages) in which God in various ways has reached out to humanity,” erected the theological scaffolding for “the sevenfold approach popularized by C. I. Scofield.”³ In a second title, also released last year, historian Daniel Hummel unequivocally asserted “the story of dispensationalism invariably begins with Darby and his teachings.”⁴ Meanwhile, in a third title published last year by Oxford University Press, another historian ascribed to Darby an arrangement of redemptive history that consisted of seven successive dispensations,⁵ despite the

¹ Tucker Carlson Show, interview of John Rich, aired on YouTube.com July 16, 2014.
<https://youtu.be/zaFNktRoTbo?t=2302>

² Brian P. Irwin and Tim Perry, *After Dispensationalism: Reading the Bible for the End of the World* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2023), 2.

³ Irwin and Perry, 40-41.

⁴ Daniel G. Hummel, *The Rise and Fall of Dispensationalism: How the Evangelical Battle over the End Times Shaped a Nation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2023), 6.

⁵ Donald Harman Akenson, *The Americanization of the Apocalypse: Creating America's Own Bible* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023), 38.

fact that at no time in Darby’s lengthy and diverse literary career did he ever subscribe to a septarian dispensational scheme. This same mistake, resulting from an anachronistic reading of Darby, was repeated by another Darby scholar in a title published by Oxford University Press just this year.⁶ It seems the attention given by first-rate scholars and world-class publishing houses has not yet corrected the centuries-long problem of mis-reading Darby and perpetuating dispensational misunderstanding.

Nevertheless, it must be acknowledged that modest advancements have been made in recent years. Daniel Hummel has rightly asserted that “the concept of dispensations, or divisions of time, was not new to Christian thought” and that “Darby was not making entirely novel contributions” when he was constructing his dispensational arrangement of redemptive history.⁷ While this point has been noted by several historians over the past few decades,⁸ it is good to see it acknowledged by historians with university appointments. Crawford Gribben further affirmed that “Darby’s interventions were not always innovations: as some of his critics noticed, many of the ideas to which he gave voice had been proposed among the ‘hotter sort’ of Protestants in the mid-seventeenth century.”⁹ Moreover, the publication of *Discovering Dispensationalism*, last year, did its part to make modest advances in raising awareness that “elements of later dispensational teaching occurred in nearly every period before J. N. Darby.”¹⁰ Nevertheless,

⁶ Crawford Gribben, *J. N. Darby and the Roots of Dispensationalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2024), 116, 120.

⁷ Hummel, 24.

⁸ Nearly a decade ago this argument was aggressively advanced by the late William C. Watson in *Dispensationalism Before Darby: Seventeenth Century and Eighteenth Century English Apocalypticism* (Silverton, OR: Lampion Press, 2015).

⁹ Gribben, x.

¹⁰ David Bebbington, *Discovering Dispensationalism: Tracing the Development of Dispensational Thought from the First to the Twenty-first Century*, ed. Cory M. Marsh and James I. Fazio (El Cajon, CA: SCS Press, 2023), taken from the cover.

ambiguity remains as to the extent which Darby's ideas influenced contemporary dispensational thought, as it is widely conceived today.

The Arrangement of Successive Dispensations in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries

In a paper presented at last year's Council on Dispensational Hermeneutics I raised the question of the extent to which Darby's ideas influenced Scofield's septarian arrangement of the dispensations which has defined the traditional dispensational understanding of redemptive history. I argued that Darby's dispensational understanding of biblical history is minimally reflected in Scofield's dispensationalism. Moreover, I drew attention to the fact that in the published works which circulated in the 17th and 18th centuries detailed human history arranged into several epochal periods, culminating in a future millennial reign of Christ upon the earth. There, I cited the French mystic and philosopher, Pierre Poiret Naudé (1646–1719), who wrote voluminously on the successive dispensations of God in a comprehensive work titled *Économie Divine*.¹¹ Across six volumes, Poiret presented his arrangement of human history into seven dispensations, by corresponding the passage of divine epochal periods to the development of humanity through phases of adulthood, from infancy to childhood, adolescence and old age. Poiret's progression of the dispensations concludes with a glorious restored future millennial kingdom. I also cited the English divine and ardent defender of Calvinist doctrine, John Edwards (1637–1716), who outlined his dispensational arrangement of history in a two volume treatise titled *ΠΟΛΥΠΟΙΚΙΛΟΣ ΣΟΦΙΑ, A Compleat History or Survey of all the Dispensations and Methods of Religion*.¹² Both Poiret and Edwards have been cited by contemporary dispensational

¹¹ Pierre Poiret Naudé, *The Divine Economy: Or, an Universal System of the Works and Purposes of God Towards Men, Demonstrated* (1687), 6 Vols.

¹² 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.

theologians,¹³ as has the nonconformist minister and famous hymn-writer, Isaac Watts (1674–1748),¹⁴ whose epochal arrangement of history¹⁵ bore such striking similarities to Scofield’s that Charles Ryrie’s concluded “If Scofield parroted anybody’s scheme, it was Watts’s, not Darby’s.”¹⁶ However, Scott Aniol has convincingly argued 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.”¹⁷

There remains, however, another dispensationally-minded English theologian whose arrangement of successive dispensations has gone almost entirely unnoticed by contemporary theologians and historians interested in tracing the dispensational tradition. The English dissenting theologian and Whig politician who sat in the House of Commons from 1715 to 1723, known as First Viscount John Shute Barrington (1678–1734), produced his own dispensational arrangement of redemptive history. In his work titled *An Essay on the Several Dispensations of God to Mankind as they lye in the Bible* (1728),¹⁸ he presented a dispensational scheme that may be seen to bear certain commonalities to Scofield’s dispensations every bit as much as these other dispensationally-minded predecessors who have been more frequently cited. Barrington’s dispensational survey of the dispensations as presented in his 1728 publication will be the subject of the rest of this paper.

¹³ Charles C. Ryrie, *Dispensationalism. Revised and Expanded* (Chicago, IL: Moody Publishers, 2007), 74–75; Renald E. Showers, *There Really is a Difference! A Comparison of Covenant and Dispensational Theology* (Bellmawr, NJ: The Friends of Israel Gospel Ministry, 1990), 27–28.

¹⁴ Ryrie, 76–77; Larry V. Crutchfield, *The Origins of Dispensationalism: The Darby Factor* (University Press of America, Lanham, MD: 1992), 207–208.

¹⁵ Isaac Watts, *The Harmony of all the Religions which God ever Prescribed to Men, and all His Dispensations Towards Them* (London, 1743).

¹⁶ Ryrie, 79.

¹⁷ Scott Aniol, “Was Isaac Watts a Proto-Dispensationalist?” in *Detroit Baptist Seminary Journal*, 16 (2011), 18.

¹⁸ John Shute Barrington, *An Essay on the Several Dispensations of God to Mankind as they lye in the Bible* (London, 1728).

The Dispensational Arrangement of First Viscount John Shute Barrington

From the outset of Barrington’s essay he defines dispensations as “the various Methods, in which God has extraordinarily discovered himself to Mankind.”¹⁹ Moreover, he clarifies that by “methods” he means the ways “by which he has conveyed farther Knowledge to them, than they could arrive at by the bare Use of the natural Powers he has given them,”²⁰ or what we might contemporary theologians might refer to as Divine disclosures of God’s “Rule”²¹ by means of special revelation. He cites the mediation of angels, the prophets, and other such means by which the successive dispensations are disclosed. With this groundwork laid, Barrington immediately proceeds to lay out the first of these dispensations, when he writes: “The first of these Dispensations, every one will presently see must be the State in which God created our first Parents; and which is known by the Name of the State of Innocence, or the State before the Fall.”²² Thus, according to Barrington the dispensations of God began with God’s initial disclosure of the Creation Mandate to Adam in the garden—a dispensation which he referred to by the name “Innocence.”²³

What is distinct about Barrington’s consideration of the dispensations is that he is concerned with the nature of man, from Adam to Christ and by extension to all Christian believers as “Sons of God.” Based on his reading of the genealogy provided in Luke’s Gospel (1:38), coupled with his understanding of the phrase “sons of god” in Genesis 6:2 as a reference to Adam’s line of descendants, Barrington concludes that Adam, in his state of innocence, is

¹⁹ Barrington, 1.

²⁰ Barrington, 2.

²¹ Barrington occasionally uses the term “Law” but most frequently prefers “Rule” to describe the governing dispensational disclosure of God to mankind (cf. 3, 5, 32, 36, 47, 49, 60, 70, 83, 88, 122–127).

²² Barrington, 2.

²³ Barrington, 2–6.

properly understood as a “son of God.” For Barrington, the dispensations reflect a redemptive restoration of this state of Divine Sonship. It is a sonship that will only be fully actualized in the coming age, which Jesus referenced when He said: “The sons of this age marry and are given in marriage. But those who are counted worthy to attain that age, and the resurrection from the dead, neither marry nor are given in marriage; nor can they die anymore, for they are equal to the angels and are sons of God, being sons of the resurrection” (Luke 20:34–36). Moreover, Barrington cites John’s First Epistle which reads: “Behold what Manner of Love the Father has bestowed upon us, that we should be called Sons of God. -- Beloved, now are we the Sons of God, and it doth not yet appear what we shall be; but we know THAT WHEN HE APPEARETH, WE SHALL BE LIKE HIM, I John iii. I, 2. (emphasis in original)”²⁴

It is evident from Barrington’s arrangement of the successive dispensations, that their culmination is in the glorious appearing of the Christ, when believers will receive their glorified bodies. However, Barrington did not firmly maintain the traditional dispensationalist’s conviction that this demanded a premillennial realization of the Davidic Kingdom upon Christ’s return to the earth. He certainly accounted for this possibility, but was not personally convinced that it was the only means by which this Sonship could be realized, when he writes: “If it relates to his Coming again the second Time into the World, as Mr. Jos. 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.”²⁵ Nevertheless, Barrington clearly perceives the culmination of the successive dispensations as “that Kingdom, over which we, as Kings, are to be placed.”²⁶

²⁴ Barrington, Title Page.

²⁵ Barrington, 153.

²⁶ Barrington, 99.

According to Barrington, the successive dispensations from the first to the last are the methods by which a subset of mankind is restored to their rightful place as “Sons of God.” For he perceived Adam’s departure from God’s Rule in the dispensation of innocence as a forfeiture of sonship. He writes “in eating the forbidden and noxious Fruit, instead of continuing the Son of God, or, in other Words, instead of continuing to be like God, and to obey him, and so to have any Right to this earthly Inheritance himself, or to transmit it to his Posterity; he forfeited it, became a Child of the Devil.”²⁷ Subsequent to the second disclosure of God’s rule to mankind, in the garden, “these two Families, viz. of God and of the Devil”²⁸ become discernable among the antediluvian patriarchs. According to Barrington it was the intermingling of these two families in Genesis 6:6 when “the sons of God saw the daughters of men,” that led to the new Divine disclosure to mankind that “God resolv’d to sweep away this impious Race of Men with a Flood, and to cleanse the Earth from their Corruption and Violence; preserving none but Noah and his Family alive.”²⁹ Barrington concludes “God seems to have blessed Mankind immediately after the Flood, so far as to have remov’d part of the Curse... by making Mankind more fruitful than their Anti-deluvian Ancestors; and by restoring them to a greater Degree of Dominion over the brute Part of the Creation, than they had had since the Fall.”³⁰ Subsequently, Barrington saw in Noah’s blessing of the Lord God of Shem (Gen 9:28) “that the Lord was the God or Father of Shem.”³¹

For Barrington the dispensation beginning with Abraham bears the utmost significance. It represents the Divine method by which God would restore sonship and blessing to mankind.

²⁷ Barrington, 10.

²⁸ Barrington, 18.

²⁹ Barrington, 19.

³⁰ Barrington, 19.

³¹ Barrington, 23.

“Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and their Descendants, being the first Family of all the Families of the Earth, that received any express Promise, that God would be their God, and bless them; or in other Words, that he would be their Father, and that they should be his Children.”³² Through Abraham, the two different lines of sons would proceed: the first being the natural descendants “that God calls Israel or the Children of Israel (the Descendants of Abraham) his Son and his First-born, Exod. iv.22.”³³ The second line of sons from Abraham would include the spiritual descendants by adoption, “which are of Faith, and the same are the children of Abraham, Gal. iii.7.”³⁴

Barrington saw in the Abrahamic covenant the promise of an earthly Kingdom, that would be realized through Moses through his physical descendants.³⁵ But he no less saw in the Abrahamic covenant the provision for a spiritual and heavenly Kingdom, the door of which was opened to the Gentiles, in order to provoke the Jews to jealousy that they would be brought to repentance, that the earthly Kingdom would be restored unto them.³⁶ In this manner, Barrington regarded two distinct Kingdoms which pertained to what he explicitly perceived to be two distinct peoples of God. He has expressed it in this way:

Thus God had from the Shedding down of the Holy Ghost (the first Act of Christ’s regal Power) till the Destruction of Jerusalem, two Kingdoms and two People in the World; but of different Kinds, viz. an earthly and an heavenly one. And though the Subjects of the earthly Kingdom had no Privilege in the heavenly Kingdom, beyond the Gentiles, who were not Subjects of the earthly Kingdom, besides the first Offer of entring into his heavenly Kingdom; yet they continued the Subjects or People of his earthly Kingdom, under his temporal Protection, (such at least as was suited to the low State of their Fidelity and Obedience, and to the wise and merciful Ends of his universal Government of the World,) owing and paying Obedience to the Law of his fleshly or carnal Commandments. This must necessarily have been the Case, since his spiritual Kingdom

³² Barrington, 26.

³³ Barrington, 26.

³⁴ Barrington, 26, Title Page.

³⁵ Barrington, 35.

³⁶ Barrington, 59.

related wholly to the Minds of Men, and alter'd nothing in their civil Obligations. Indeed it bound down their Political (as well as Oeconomical) Duties more strictly upon them. Rom. xiii. 1 — 8. 1 Cor. vii.10 — 25. So far was it from dissolving any civil Polity or Government in the World; or theirs in particular.³⁷

In Barrington's dispensational understanding of God's dealings with these two peoples of God, he perceived a temporary setting aside of the Jewish people upon the occasion of the destruction of the temple.³⁸ However, he believed that "there will come a time, according as God seems to have reveal'd it by his holy Apostles and prophets, that they shall be restor'd, not only to be his spiritual Subjects, but his earthly People again in their own Land."³⁹ Again, it is worth repeating that Barrington was uncertain whether this restored earthly kingdom would be realized within the context of the millennium, or in some other way.⁴⁰ He nevertheless anticipated the restoration of the earthly Kingdom to Israel, that would at last give way to the final expression of the heavenly Kingdom signaling "the End and Consummation of all God's Dispensations." In his own words:

This earthly Kingdom however, when restor'd, is to cease before the heavenly one. For that will not determine but with the End and Consummation of all God's Dispensations towards the Children of Men. When all the Enemies of God's Family and Kingdom, and of his Children and People, are to be put under Christ's Feet; the last of which shall be Death: Then will his Kingdom appear in its brightest Glory. And when the Father shall have subdued all Things unto him, [Christ] then also shall the Son himself be subject unto him [the Father] that God may be all in all, i Cor. xv. 25, 26, 28.⁴¹

One additional distinctly dispensational feature in Barrington's conception of this eschatological Kingdom is that he perceived that Christians would function in a mediatorial role. He posited: "Is it not highly probable, that the Glory Dignity and Dominion, to which we shall be advanced, will be for the Service of that Kingdom, that it is the Father's good Pleasure to give

³⁷ Barrington, 63–64.

³⁸ Barrington, 65.

³⁹ Barrington, 65–66.

⁴⁰ Barrington, 153.

⁴¹ Barrington, 66.

us?”⁴² Moreover, he referred to the eschatological Kingdom as “that Kingdom, over which we, as Kings, are to be placed.”⁴³ Though Barrington would regard the appointment of Christian believers over this eschatological Kingdom as “additional Rewards” of which he says “but God has not proposed these positive Rewards separate from the Rewards that are the necessary Result of virtuous Actions, but in Conjunction with them, or as an Addition to them.”⁴⁴ Barrington saw the Christian believer’s appointment in the coming Kingdom as a virtuous reward that God graciously grants to those commensurate with their obedience in the present age—though he otherwise made no deliberate allusion to the *bema* seat judgment of Christ.⁴⁵

Though Barrington anticipated a future restoration of the national Kingdom of Israel upon the earth, it should be seen that his eschatological framework did not account for a rapture of the saints, an earthly period of Great Tribulation, nor did it necessitate an earthly millennial reign of Christ. Nevertheless, these eschatological themes, which Barrington grappled with in the early eighteenth century, offer a window into the under-represented and often overlooked voice of English dissenting theologians that would reach a crescendo in the nineteenth century.

Conclusion

I hope to elsewhere give attention to several other of J. N. Darby’s dispensationally-minded predecessors. However, this brief survey of Barrington’s dispensational treatise, published in 1728, remains an poignant example of the extent to which English theologians were wrestling with dispensational themes for more than a century before Darby came to his own

⁴² Barrington, 99.

⁴³ Barrington, 99.

⁴⁴ Barrington, 100.

⁴⁵ Barrington, 99–100.

dispensational conclusions.⁴⁶ While popular mischaracterizations will likely continue to abound concerning Darby as the progenitor of contemporary dispensational thought. I remain hopeful that in the coming years the tide of this false narrative will begin to turn, as even detractors are beginning to change their tune. Donald Harman Akenson, who in 2016 cited Darby as the architect of the dispensational arrangement of history into seven successive ages, that others would go on to emulate,⁴⁷ has come around to acknowledge that Scofield's concept of the biblical covenants and dispensations "is very unlike anything that John Nelson Darby would have proposed."⁴⁸ In fact, Akenson goes on to suggest that Scofield did not get his septarian dispensational scheme from Darby—or from any English theologian, for that matter. He has posited that Scofield may have rather been influenced by the Southern Baptist minister James Robinson Graves (1820–1893),⁴⁹ whose book *The Work of Christ in the Covenant of Redemption: Developed in Seven Dispensations*⁵⁰ he imagines served to influence of *Scofield Reference Bible* (1909). But that is another story.

⁴⁶ Darby's first publications on ecclesiastical subjects began to emerge in 1828, and his eschatological and dispensational convictions were not codified until the 1830s.

⁴⁷ 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), 447.

⁴⁸ Akenson, *The Americanization of the Apocalypse*, 430.

⁴⁹ Akenson, *The Americanization of the Apocalypse*, 430–431.

⁵⁰ James Robinson Graves, *The Work of Christ in the Covenant of Redemption Developed in Seven Dispensations* (Memphis, TN: Baptist Book House, 1883).

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