

Perspectives

explorations in theology and practice

Dispensationism: history & critique

***V**olume 9 (September 2026)*

Martin Scott

Perspectives: explorations in theology and practice continue in the theme of the 'explorations' series of books. On a given subject they are designed to provoke thought as well as presenting a perspective.

This ninth volume is a summary of the history of 'Dispensationalism' and a critique of it.

Biblical texts quoted are from The New Revised Standard Version, Updated Edition, unless noted otherwise.

Copyright © Martin Scott, September, 2026

Dispensationalism - history and critique

'Dispensationalism': a big word that describes a recent approach to eschatology (by 'recent' I mean in the theological scheme of things, dating only from around 1830). For those unfamiliar with this term, please do not be put off by the word. Let me first greatly simplify it so that we know what lies at its core. At the core is the belief that the church will escape an end-time persecution through what is called the 'Rapture', often called the 'Secret Rapture'. This core element holds that the church of true believers will be taken from the earth to heaven (Jesus coming **for** his church) while everyone else is 'left behind' and suffer great tribulation¹, then after that time of tribulation Jesus comes **with** his church.² There is much more to Dispensationalism than this one core belief and in due course I will seek to explain other elements. We should also note that there are those who believe in a Rapture who are not Dispensationalists, but virtually all who believe in a Rapture have been influenced by Dispensationalism.

The overall popularity of this viewpoint in the Western evangelical / pentecostal churches and inevitably the spread of this viewpoint

¹ This event will not be visible (except the after-results will be!) and it will occur 7 years before the coming of the Lord (others hold that it will take place 3½ years before the Lord's coming. Those two approaches are termed pre-tribulation and mid-tribulation respectively.

² The return of Christ is effectively split in two. The first is not a visible event but true believers disappear; the second event is the coming in power to set up the millennial kingdom with 'headquarters' in Jerusalem.

around the world wherever missionaries have travelled means it is not simply a fringe view but deeply influential. The view is also popular because of the sheer amount of popularist literature, such as the '**Left Behind**' series of books and DVDs, that has been published. And as we will cover later the publishing of the **Scofield Bible** greatly furthered the cause. It is worth noting that it is not at all popular though at an academic level (perhaps the 'Progressive Dispensationalist' school³ can be seen as having academic credibility).

I consider the presence of the Dispensational view is such that it can obscure the centre of eschatology, namely that of the return of Christ and the inauguration of 'a new heaven and a new earth'. In Dispensationalism that central event gives way to a series of 'end-time' events. Dispensationalism is a relative newcomer to the field of theology – this does not make it intrinsically wrong; but it does mean that it should be viewed with the right level of suspicion. This claim that it is only found as far back as 1830, has been challenged in the recent few years, with a number of more ancient writings being presented in order to claim that the rapture was taught previously in history.

I will look at three of those writings in what follows but perhaps two aspects, if noted, will weaken this claim to the greater level of

³ I am aware of 'Progressive Dispensationalism' (Craig Blaising and Darrell Block) but have never read what they have written. As I understand it they are bringing an adjustment to the hard lines between the 'dispensations' and allow for an overlap. They still hold to a 'rapture' a 'millennial rule' and the ongoing nature of the former covenant with Israel (maybe read what I wrote on 'all Israel will be saved' to get my take on that).

historical credibility:

- If (and I will disagree with this claim) the rapture has a level of historical credibility it still remains clear that Dispensationalism as taught from the 1830s has no prior place in theology. The ‘escape’ of the saints can be read into the ancient texts but Dispensationalism cannot be.
- And a major second point is that there is **no** mention of a rapture or anything alluding to it in any of what might be considered foundational creeds and historical statements of faith. Not to be found in the Nicene Creed (325), the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed (381), nor the Chalcedonian Creed (451), and the Athanasian Creed (500). It cannot be found in the Augsburg Confession (1530), the Canons of Dort (1618-1619), the Baptist Confession of Faith (1644), the Westminster Confession (1646), nor the Methodist Articles of Religion (1784). It is not recorded in any document that shaped Christian understanding.

Irenaeus (bishop of Lyon, 130-202)

Tradition holds that he was a ‘disciple’ of Polycarp who was a ‘disciple of John, the disciple of Jesus. He wrote,

And therefore, in the end when the Church is suddenly caught up from this, it is said, ‘There shall be tribulation such as has not been

since the beginning, neither shall be.' For this is the last contest of the righteous, in which, when they overcome, they are crowned with incorruption (Against Heresies, 5:29).

The church is 'suddenly caught up from this' (tribulation) sounds as if he could be propounding an escape, a rapture of the church prior to the tribulation. If he did mean a rapture, such a view is in distinct contrast to what he wrote three chapters earlier in the same writing. There he wrote,

And they shall lay Babylon waste, and burn her with fire, and shall give their kingdom to the beast, and put the Church to flight.

In that passage, commenting on his understanding of Daniel and Revelation, he clearly indicates that **the church is present in and through what he understands to be the tribulation**. Perhaps he contradicted himself, but more likely (in the first passage quoted above) he sees the church present through the tribulation for he calls it **the last contest** and that they **overcome**, not that the Lord 'rescues' them! The 'caught up' is not something that occurs before the tribulation but takes place, as he writes, 'in the end'.

His language in that isolated text could be colonised to suggest he believes in a rapture, but a wider reading of Irenaeus shows that he held to the historic pre-millennial understanding of eschatology. (This is not my position but one that has historical credibility.)

Cyprian (200-258, bishop of Carthage)

Here are two quotes that have been registered as Cyprian's support for a rapture,

We who see that terrible things have begun, and know that still more terrible things are imminent, may regard it as the greatest advantage to depart from it as quickly as possible. ... Do you not give God thanks, do you not congratulate yourself, that by an earlier departure you are taken away, and delivered from the shipwrecks and disasters that are imminent?

Let us greet the day which assigns each of us to his own home, which snatches us hence, and sets us free from the snares of the world, and restores us to paradise and the kingdom (Treatise 7: On the Mortality).

These, I consider, are easily refuted when placed in the historical context. He is writing during a time of plague and persecution. He comforts Christians who feared death; in that context **dying in Christ** was a blessing, sparing them from the various hardships. **Far from being rapture-affirming statements they are affirming that the last enemy, death, has been overcome.**

Ephraem the Syrian (4th Century)

The writing that is quoted is in different forms and is now held to be pseudepigrapha and dating from the 6th or 8th century, hence now often referred to as being the work of Pseudo-Ephraem.

The report of these things does not disturb us, nor the spectacle itself. For the elect shall be gathered prior to the tribulation, so they shall not see the confusion and the great tribulation coming upon the unrighteous world.

Again the isolated text could be taken to support a rapturist interpretation, but when read in the wider context of this writing it is clear that the escape is through death, not rapture! Here are quotations from the wider work (emphases added - any comments inside square brackets:

Nation will rise up against nation, And kingdom against kingdom. Lawlessness will be sovereign on earth. **And the defiled will pursue after the saints.** People will openly apostatize and augment the left side; **the righteous ones will suffer indignities** from those who belong to the side of the sinners [no escape].

Here we have **death** as an escape from the persecution; that saints are not raptured away but they suffer while the devil is active on earth persecuting and killing Christians during tribulation is clear in the writings. The writing as a whole and not an isolated text needs to be considered. Here are a few quotes that indicate the presence of believers during the tribulation.

Pronouncing the good fortune of the deceased who had avoided the calamity: 'Blessed are you for you were borne away [evidently to the grave] And hence you escaped [by death] from the afflictions!

Then the Evil One will become enraged with the saints at that time; he will draw his **terrible sword and sever the necks of the righteous ones** {no escape and the saints are persecuted and

killed]..

In those days [during the tribulation] people shall not be buried, neither Christian, nor heretic, neither Jew, nor pagan, because of fear and dread there is not one who buries them; because all people, while they are fleeing, ignore them.

There of course could have been writers who believed in some form of rapture (they might have been influenced by texts relating to Enoch, Elijah or Moses) but there are no mainline writers who held those views and there is no Dispensationalist structure prior to the one developed by J.N. Darby (1800-1882).

Scripture is not focused on an escape but on resurrection:

Everything that the Father gives me will come to me, and anyone who comes to me I will never drive away, for I have come down from heaven not to do my own will but the will of him who sent me. And this is the will of him who sent me, that I should lose nothing of all that he has given me but **raise it up on the last day**. This is indeed the will of my Father, that all who see the Son and believe in him may have eternal life, and **I will raise them up on the last day** (John 7:37-40).

No one can come to me unless drawn by the Father who sent me, and **I will raise that person up on the last day** (John 6:44).

Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood have eternal life, and **I will raise them up on the last day** (John 6:54).

Resurrection - the hope that is within us. And resurrection was the theological answer to how God will be faithful. If the restoration of all

things is the bringing of created things and persons to their fitted conclusion (not their destruction) then a question remains. That question was related to the destiny of those who had departed but were righteous - how will they be rewarded? The belief of the restoration of creation raised the issue of 'but what about those who have died' (the very same question that Paul answers in the supposedly core-passage on the rapture!). The resounding answer was that God is faithful and those departed saints will be raised **on the last day**. Resurrection, not rapture, was and is the hope.

Theology and practice

As with all theology there is a practical outworking to what we believe.

A belief in the Rapture, namely that one day (and very soon) the church will be raptured out of this world, and there are those who are in danger of being left behind is a hope / belief in escapism.

- Such a mentality will not help us be committed to transformation of the world as we have it.
- It will also mean that any increase in darkness will only confirm our viewpoint, and rather than challenge the darkness we will tend to accept it as a 'sign of the times'.
- I consider that perhaps there is little that has been more destructive to an expectation of transformation than this teaching.
- Also such teaching on eschatology produces fear rather than

faith – a fear of being left behind.

- It also lends itself to an abandoning of this world to the devil.
- There can also be an over-focus on signs of the end, seeking to interpret what is happening in the world in the light of supposed prophetic Scriptures.
- There can be more of an interest – and a passive interest at that – in the rise of evil than in the prayer for the kingdom of God to come. *Maranatha* being the prayer of the New Testament.

How did Dispensationalism develop?

An important element is the historical socio-political context. The predominant eschatological view during the 17th and 18th centuries was that of post-millennialism.⁴ Post-millennialism is the belief that the spread of the Gospel will bring in a golden age, i.e. the millennial / 1000 year rule by Jesus on earth will take place after there has been great success through the preaching of the gospel. The rule of Christ will be manifest after (post) the work of evangelism. So in the 17th and 18th centuries there was an optimism that prevailed concerning the prospective success of world-evangelisation. The writings of the revivalists Jonathan Edwards and George Whitefield were prominent in spreading the belief that the millennium (this golden age for the gospel) was arriving. The gospel was expected to soon prevail and it would not be long before there would also be a

⁴ We will need to address millennialial views in a later writing.

conversion of the Jews to Christ.⁵

There is however a shift that began to take place as the optimism was challenged by world events. In a short space of time there were three significant wars in the late 18th and early 19th centuries that brought a reality check.

- The war of independence (1775-84)
- The French revolution (1789-93)
- The Napoleonic wars (1809-15).

In this period there were also a number of major changes within a number of the European monarchies; there was widespread unrest in Britain, and the wider socio-political arena was equally unstable.

Napoleon was setting family members on various thrones in Europe – his vision was to become ‘supreme king of kings and sovereign of the Roman Empire’. A number of ‘students’ of prophecy speculated that he could indeed be the antiChrist and that there would be a revived Roman Empire in fulfilment of Daniel 2. All of this unrest fuelled interest in things prophetic and brought a revival of pre-millennial expectation. (The pre-millennial understanding that Jesus would return to set up his kingdom on earth as the spread of the gospel was failing and darkness was visibly increasing.)

‘Pre-’ meaning before: Jesus would have to come before there would be any real manifestation of his kingdom on earth. So we are entering a period of new interest in eschatology and the return of

⁵ Views that are either post-millennial or lean that way often come to the surface during times of ‘revival’.

Christ: it is during this period that:

- Adventism arose with Joseph Miller saying that Christ was to return on March 21, 1843; and,
- Jehovah's Witnesses also developed with Charles Russell saying that Christ would set up his 'heavenly kingdom' in 1914.
- So there is a shift from the optimism of the triumph of the Gospel to a pessimistic view that the last times had arrived and the powers of darkness were prevailing.

This is the context in which two early figures that are at the root of Dispensationalism come on the scene.

One is a controversial Scottish minister and the other one of the main influences within the Plymouth Brethren movement. As we look at this again note that – relatively speaking – Dispensationalism and a belief in the Rapture is a very recent phenomenon. **Edward Irving** (1792-1834), licensed as a church of Scotland minister in 1815, came to London to Caledonian Chapel in Hatton Gardens in 1822. He was both controversial and popular. In 1825 he addressed an audience with the title of 'Babylon and Infidelity Foredoomed'. In that he challenged the post-millennial optimism and spoke of a 'series of thick-coming judgements and fearful perplexities before the return of Jesus Christ.' He was disparaging about the success of mission work on many lands, including Southern Europe as judgments were about to fall there. Irving was in no doubt that the Gentile Church had failed, seeing the judgements of Matthew 24 applying to the church. There was though an expectation of a Jewish Dispensation that would soon come:

When the Lord shall have finished the taking of witness against the Gentiles... he will begin to prepare another ark of testimony... and to that end will turn his Holy Spirit unto his ancient people, the Jews, and bring them unto those days of refreshing... This outpouring of the Spirit is known in Scripture by 'the latter rain'.⁶

In 1826 Henry Drummond had opened up his home at Albury Park to a group of 20 invited guests to discuss issues concerning the immediate fulfilment of prophecy. Irving had already developed a 'Society for the Investigation of Prophecy' and that society was soon subsumed under the conferences that were taking place at Albury. The conferences became an annual event from 1826-30 and became increasingly more speculative on issues of prophecy and the interpretation of Scripture. Alongside the conferences a publication came forth: *The Morning Watch*. Irving died in 1834 otherwise he might have become the main continuing voice in developing Dispensationalism. This however was to become the task of **John Nelson Darby** (1800-82). In closing this section I quote the main text that is used as a claim for a rapture. I suggest that you read the text and note the question that Paul is being asked and the total absence of comfort along the lines of 'heaven' as he centres on the historical hope of those who are aligned to the God of hope, ending with how that hope is what will bring encouragement to one another.

But we do not want you to be uninformed, brothers and sisters,

⁶ Edward Irving, preliminary discourse, "on Ben Ezra", *The Coming of Messiah in Glory and Majesty*, by Juan Josafat Ben-Ezra a converted Jew, Translated from the Spanish, with a Preliminary Discourse (London, L.B. Seeley & Sons, 1827), pp. 5-6..

about those who have died, so that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope. For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have died. For this we declare to you by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will **by no means precede those who have died**. For the Lord himself, with a cry of command, with the archangel's call and with the sound of God's trumpet, will **descend from heaven**, and the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up in the clouds together with them to meet the Lord in the air, and so we will be with the Lord forever. Therefore encourage one another with these words. (1 Thessalonians 4:13-18).

John Nelson Darby (1800-82)

Although Darby did not acknowledge his sources most scholars point to Irving as a very significant influence on his developing views. Darby was a charismatic figure, a dominant personality, a persuasive speaker and had a zeal for mission regarding his dispensationalist beliefs. He personally founded Plymouth Brethren churches as far away as Germany, Switzerland, France and the United States, and translated the entire Scriptures.

The churches Darby planted with the seeds of a separatist premillennial dispensationalism, in turn sent missionaries to Africa, the West Indies, Australia and New Zealand, so that by the time of his death in 1882, around 1500 Plymouth Brethren churches had already been founded world-wide.

His views also came to influence the Bible and Prophetic Conferences associated with Niagara and other centres in North America from 1875. The shift of interpretation that Darby brought has been noted:

Roy Coad, writing a history of the Brethren Movement, admits that,

For the traditional view of the Revelation, another was substituted.⁷

James Barr is considerably more forthright and argues that premillennial dispensationalism was,

...individually invented by J. N. Darby... concocted in complete contradiction to all main Christian tradition...⁸

It is almost certain (and Coad claims this) that the 'futurist view' of the end times, so evident in Darby's writings can be traced to the work Irving had translated: "The Coming of the Messiah in Glory and Majesty".

Clarence Bass concludes that with respect to Darby's views that:

Such a concept is singularly missing from historic Christian theology... Darby is pointedly correct in stating that this came to him as a new truth, since it is not to be found in theological literature prior to his proclamation of it. It is not that exegetes prior to his time did not see a covenant between God and Israel, or a future relation of Israel to the millennial reign, but they always

⁷ Roy Coad, *A History of the Brethren Movement* (Exeter, Paternoster, 1968), p. 129.

⁸ James Barr, *Escaping from Fundamentalism* (London, SCM, 1984), p. 6.

viewed the church as the continuation of God's single program of redemption begun in Israel.⁹

It is here that we note an important point is being made:

- Darby does not see the church as the continuation of God's single redemptive program, rather the church becomes a parenthesis in the work of God. The purposes of God were centred on Israel (past) and will again (future).

Darby began publishing his prophetic speculations in 1831. Both he and Edward Irving began to postulate two stages to Christ's imminent return. First, there would be an invisible 'appearing' when Christians would meet Christ in the air and be removed from the earth, a process which came to be known as 'the rapture of the saints'. Then with the restraining presence of the Holy Spirit removed from the world, the antiChrist would arise and the seven year tribulation would begin. His rule would finally be crushed only by the public 'appearing' of Jesus Christ.

Darby had an increasing influence on other venues including the Powerscourt Conferences in Dublin held in the 1830's (he was originally an ordained Anglican priest in Dublin), in New York in 1868, London in 1873, Chicago in 1875, and then culminating in the Bible Conference Movement and the Niagara Conferences of 1883 to 1897. Regular topics covered included speculations on the Second Coming.

⁹ Clarence Bass, *Backgrounds to Dispensationalism* (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1986) pp. 26-27.

Regarding the rapture, Darby admitted as much that his doctrine of the rapture was an innovation, the result of 'express revelation', indeed he seemed quite pleased with the reaction to it.

Although his influence on Brethrenism in Britain waned, Darby's influence in North America increased and he made seven journeys there over a twenty year period. It has been estimated that he spent 40% of his time in the United States during those 20 years, and had considerable influence on leaders such as James H. Brookes, Dwight L. Moody, William Blackstone and C. I. Scofield, as well as on emerging evangelical Bible Schools and Prophecy Conferences.

George Marsden, in his history of the rise of fundamentalism between 1870 and 1930, says (and note the names he lists):

This new form of premillennial teaching, imported from England, first spread in America through prophecy conferences where the Bible was studied intently. Summer conferences, a newly popular form of vacation in the age of the trains, were particularly effective. Most importantly, Dwight L. Moody had sympathies with the broad outlines of dispensationalism and had as his closest lieutenants dispensationalist leaders such as Reuben A. Torrey (1856-1928), James M. Gray (1851-1925), C. I. Scofield (1843-1921), William J. Erdman (1833-1923), A.C. Dixon (1854-1925), and A. J. Gordon (1836-1895). These men were activist evangelists who promoted a host of Bible conferences and other missionary and evangelistic efforts. They also gave the dispensationalist movement institutional permanence by assuming leadership of the new Bible institutes such as the Moody Bible Institute (1886), the Bible Institute of Los Angeles (1907), and the Philadelphia College of the Bible (1914). The network of related institutes that soon sprang up became the

nucleus for much of the important fundamentalist movement of the twentieth century. Dispensationalist leaders, in fact, actively organised this antimodernist effort. Notably, they oversaw the publication between 1910-1915 of the widely distributed twelve-volume paperback series, *The Fundamentals*.¹⁰

If it had not been for the connection with these influential leaders in North America, Dispensationalism might well have simply become a minor perspective on eschatology. And it is probably the Scofield Bible that became the singularly most powerful tool in enabling a Dispensational interpretation of Scripture to take root.

The reason for giving the amount of time that I am on addressing Dispensationalism / the Rapture is not simply the widespread belief in the Rapture but the influence this type of eschatology has had. Dispensationalist type of thinking has also influenced other theologies and we often end up with Dispensationalism with a twist. Of course someone might decide that the approach is also biblical.

So not all might believe in a Rapture but the popularity of the Left Behind series shows the effect this approach to Scripture has. End-time scenarios are a great fascination!

¹⁰ George M. Marsden. *Understanding Fundamentalism and Evangelicalism* (Grand Rapids, Michigan, Eerdmans), 1991. p. 40.

The widespread influence (to summarise what has gone before) flows through to where we are this time in history in this way:

- Irving and Darby at the roots.
- Then an influence on D.L. Moody the very influential north American revivalist (most influential?).
- The publication of the Scofield Bible (and off-shoots such as Charles Ryrie study Bible) where the way to interpret Scripture is placed within the very pages of Scripture.
- The reaction to liberalism and the publication of the twelve-volume paperback series, *The Fundamentals* (1910-15) – influenced greatly by Dispensational teachers.
- Pentecostalism which borrowed its eschatology from Dispensationalism. Even great parts of the Charismatic movement have done the same.

In the mid-90s I studied the eschatology of the new church movement (a MS is available) and noted in a presentation on the restoration of the church a question in the margin (what about Laodicea?). This showed the tension. The eschatology that was assumed by the person writing the note was Dispensationalist (Laodicea being the 'lukewarm' church and a description of the last church was understood to be a letter to the church in the final era before the return of Chris) but the presentation was on the restoration of the church. That tension was expressed in the note. I see this again in places today. Revival, restoration of the five-fold ministry, but no consistent teaching on eschatology either to moderate the (over-the-top-optimistic) belief or to counteract the pessimism of Dispensationalism.

Let us make a little jump ahead and see the danger of these interpretations. Is the Bible being looked at and wrestled with regard to historical context and meaning, or is it the current scenario that the Bible has to line up with? What sometimes is called newspaper exegesis.

An example of 'newspaper exegesis' can be seen in **Charisma magazine** and their publishing of an article in April 1991, entitled 'The Gulf War and Beyond: Respected Church Leaders Address Questions About War, Peace, Prophecy and the Middle East'.

One leader interviewed in this article said this:

Isaiah 21 speaks of the fall of Babylon. Verse 1 mentions a storm coming from the desert: "As whirlwinds in the South (the Negeb) sweep through, so it [the judgment of God by hostile armies] comes from the desert" (Amp.). This could be Operation Desert Storm!

[For those that remember the war in 1991 was called 'Operation Desert Storm'! The name given then was judged to be the same as the one in Isaiah.]

At first glance, this may sound quite reasonable; there seem to be some remarkable parallels between Isaiah 21 and the Gulf War. But look again. Is this what Isaiah had in mind?

The parallels are coincidental... and once the war was over the connection was conveniently forgotten. This moving on to the next 'news' article has always been present in these approaches. I noted earlier how Napoleon Bonaparte was understood to be the antiChrist - not a suggestion that is made today for obvious reasons.

Why should the terrors of Revelation be around the corner... why not past? Why not suggest that the fulfilment was the bubonic plague that killed 1/3 of the population of Europe... or why not another interpretation all-together?

Cyrus Ingerson Scofield (1843-1921)

There are many controversies surrounding the life of Scofield, and questions regarding his integrity have never been adequately answered. However, the key issue in this article is to do with his popularising of the Dispensational viewpoint.

Scofield was a disciple of James Brookes (minister of Walnut Street Presbyterian Church, St. Louis) who was influenced by J.N. Darby, and Scofield in turn was a major influence on D.L. Moody (and it was Scofield who officiated at his funeral).

Scofield took the text in 2 Timothy 2:15 about 'rightly dividing the word of truth' to indicate that there were divisions within Scripture that were to be rightly discerned.¹¹ This was the foundation to his

¹¹ He was of course working from the King James version. The word is ὀρθοτομέω (orthotomeō) meaning to handle in a non-distorting way; it is used here and twice in Proverbs - where we are instructed to God and he will make our paths straight (3:6) and in 11:5 where righteousness will keep us straight. There is certainly no sense of 'dividing' Scripture into

understanding of the different dispensations in Scripture. The Moody Bible Institute and Dallas Theological Seminary gave their support to the book *Rightly Dividing the Word of Truth* that Scofield wrote, thus giving it a major boost. (And since those early years the book has been often reprinted.)

The influence of the Scofield Bible (Scofield Reference Bible (1909 and with minor authorial edits and the addition of chronology in 1917); The New Scofield Study Bible (1984)) cannot be underestimated. The 'genius' of it was that the way to interpret the Bible was actually now written within its own pages. There was no need for an add-on book, the whole system was self-contained.

The following quotes will illustrate the influence of the Scofield Bible:

The most important single document of all fundamentalism... which has been the normal religious diet of many millions of readers. Its name itself makes clear what it is, a private interpretation... Both serious biblical scholarship and the established traditions of the major churches were alike ignored.¹²

The Scofield Reference Bible became the Bible of fundamentalism, and the theology of the notes approached confessional status in many Bible schools, institutes and seminaries established in the

dispensations implied!

¹² James Barr, *Escaping from Fundamentalism* (London, SCM, 1984), p. 6.

early decades of this century.¹³

The Bible itself sold phenomenally. In the USA alone by 1945 there had been some 2 million copies that had been sold. Some have (understandably) claimed that it single-handedly shaped modern American fundamentalism and popularized dispensationalism.

Scofield's seven dispensations

Although there are differences between the Dispensations in the original Bible of 1909 / 1917 and the revised work in 1984, the underlying shape remains the same. Here I outline the newer list:

1. Innocence (Gen. 1.28)
2. Conscience or Moral Responsibility (Gen. 3.7)
3. Human Government (Gen.8.15)
4. Promise (Gen. 12.1)
5. Law (Ex. 19.1)
6. Church (Acts 2.1)
7. Kingdom (Rev. 20.4)

To state that these are divisions imposed on Scripture I hope is clear. (The clear division in Scripture is between the Law and the

¹³ Craig A. Blaising 'Dispensationalism, The Search for Definition' in *Dispensationalism, Israel and the Church, The Search for Definition* ed. Craig A. Blaising & Darrell L. Bock (Grand Rapids, Michigan, Zondervan, 1992) p. 21.) [We also can note that Blaising himself is a (progressive) Dispensationalist, so he is not making this statement as a direct criticism of Scofield's work.]

Prophets and Gospel that came through Christ. We read that ‘all the Prophets and the Law prophesied **until** John’ (Matt. 11:13). But in the Scofield division, Jesus is ministering under the dispensation of law!)

In Dispensationalism the Gospels are for the Jew, so for example the Lord’s Prayer and the phrase ‘forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us’ is not applicable to the church as it is based on ‘legal ground’. The Letters then are for the church age, and the age of grace will end with the apostasy of the church. When the church age ends in failure and apostasy it will be replaced by a revived national Israel who will enjoy the blessings of the final kingdom dispensation. In making the divide between Israel and the church Scofield can even insist that Israel is the wife of Yahweh, while the church is the bride of Christ.¹⁴

The end of the church era (or dispensation of grace) will be the apostasy of the church, with the confusion of a false unity based around the papacy. The Babylon of Revelation takes two forms: an ecclesial-Babylon and a political Babylon, with the latter eventually destroying the former (Rev. 17:15-18).

There are obvious contradictions to Scripture in the system developed, but this work has shaped the way for those who follow. Writers such as Hal Lindsey (the next person I will look at), particularly with the encouragement of the foundation of the state of Israel in 1948, have seen in this step the clear fulfillment of Scripture, and developed an expectation of a revival among Jews

¹⁴ Scofield, Scofield., fn. 1, p. 922.

and the imminent return of Christ.

Hal Lindsey (1929-2024)

A prolific writer and one who claims to be able to interpret current events in the light of prophetic Scriptures, he is a major influencer on the Dispensationalist believers.

His books include:

- Late Great Planet Earth (1970)
- There's a New World Coming (1973)
- The 1980's Countdown to Armageddon (1980)
- The Final Battle (1994)
- Planet Earth 2000 A.D. (1994, & 1996)
- Apocalypse Code (1997)
- Planet Earth: The Final Chapter (1998).

(A number of the books are re-writes of earlier titles.)

It is inevitable that there have been revisions regarding the predictions within the book (this is inevitable whenever there is an attempt to make current events fit into biblical prophecy). Here is one such revision (the first quote from a publication in 1980 and the second from 1998):

The goal of this book is not merely to show which prophecies have been fulfilled since Late Great came out in 1970, however. Even more important, it is intended to analyze what will occur in the

decade we have just entered... The decade of the 1980's could very well be the last decade of history as we know it.¹⁵

This book doesn't dwell on the past, it looks to the future. Because we are so close to the final, climactic stages of world history, it is considerably easier today for the student of Bible prophecy to see with some accuracy what's coming next... I am certain... The Second Advent will occur in the next few years – probably in your lifetime.¹⁶

The first book written in 1980 predicts the 80s as the final decade; the second book written in 1998 pushes it a few years forward!! Of course words and phrases such as 'probably' and 'could very well be' covers the possible accusation of 'you said' but for the reader with book in one hand and TV remote in the other, inside knowledge of the times is right there for them! Given that we are now a few years beyond 1998, we might be due a new prediction! Throughout he has consistently held to the interpretive perspective that the current generation is the one that the Bible is talking about when it comes to the fulfilment of Scripture:

It is clear that the Bible can't be talking about any other time in history but today. No man knows the day or hour this dramatic climax is going to occur. But there can be little doubt that this is the generation. It could start tomorrow.¹⁷

He interprets current nations as being the nations in the Bible such as the Palestinians are the Philistines of Scripture, Lebanon is the

¹⁵ Lindsey, *The 1980's Countdown to Armageddon* (1980), p. 7.

¹⁶ Lindsey, *Planet Earth: The Final Chapter* (1998), p. 3.

¹⁷ Lindsey, *Planet Earth: 2000 A.D.* (1994), p. 151.

Tyre of old.¹⁸ This is without warrant. To take one example from the above, the Philistines of Scripture lost their distinct identity some 2,500 years ago (they were originally a sea-people from the Mediterranean) being both absorbed by various empires and exiled. Palestinians derive their name from the land and (ironically) throughout the history of the region there is inevitably an element of Jewish DNA among them!

The apocalyptic visions of Revelation are to be taken literally (or at least literal once re-interpreted through Lindsey's grid). John did not have language to describe what he saw, so with Lindsey's guidance we know that John's 'locusts' are really helicopters:

'horses prepared for battle' are heavily armed attack helicopters, 'crowns of gold' are the helmets worn by pilots, and the 'sound of their wings' are the thunderous sound of many attack helicopters flying overhead.¹⁹

The 'bow' wielded by the antichrist in Revelation 6:1-2? Well John had no way of describing what Lindsay knows were inter-continental ballistic missiles.²⁰ All now becomes clear for the reader!

This type of interpretation is what makes the books both popular and also dangerous. Popular because the reader now has inside information as to the progress of history, and dangerous because there is no need to bring about any level of change to the world we live in. The world is hurtling toward destruction, but wonderfully the

¹⁸ Lindsey, *Planet Earth: The Final Chapter* (1998), pp. 2-3.

¹⁹ Lindsey, *Apocalypse Code* (1997), p. 42.

²⁰ Lindsey, *Apocalypse Code* (1997), p. 72.

believer will be raptured from the scene thus avoiding all the troubles.

Regarding celebrations for the new millennium (the 2st Century) Lindsey wrote:

Just for the record: I'm not planning to attend. In fact looking at the state of the world today, I wouldn't make any long-term earthly plans. We may be caught up to meet Christ in the clouds, between now and then - just as I described in an earlier chapter. Could I be wrong? Of course. The rapture may not occur between now and the year 2000. But never before in the history of the planet have events and conditions so coincided as to set the stage for this history-stopping event... I want to spend the final pages of this book discussing what I expect to see happen in the hours and minutes we have left.²¹

The imminence of the 'end-times' can be seen in Lindsey's assertions that the antichrist is alive, in Europe, and imminently getting ready.

Antichrist is alive and ready in Europe:

Here are a number of quotes from Lindsey's writings:

I believe this man is alive today-alive and waiting to come forth... I believe this leader is alive somewhere in Europe; perhaps he is already a member of the EEC parliament.²²

²¹ Lindsay, *Planet earth: 2000 A.D.*, p. 306.

²² Lindsey, *Late Great Planet Earth* (1970), p. 113.

He will immediately rise to prominence in the EEC and from that post he will offer the world amazing solutions to all its complex and terrifying problems. Because of his superhuman powers and his solutions to the world's conflicts, the anti-Christ will be chosen to lead the EEC.²³

Heading up what will evolve into a 10-nation confederacy will be a man of such magnetism and power that he will become the greatest dictator the world has ever known... And he is alive today. There is a potential dictator waiting in the wings somewhere in Europe who will make Adolf Hitler and Josef Stalin look like choir boys. Right now he is preparing to take his throne, inflaming his soul with visions of what he will be able to do for mankind with his grand schemes and revolutionary ideas... Is alive and well on planet Earth... Let's go meet him.²⁴

The focus in this article is not to discuss all the details of this (and other) author(s), but simply to try and track the development of the theology and also to show how embedded it has become within much Christian thought. After a brief summary of the Dispensationalist scheme (below) I will then turn to the issue of the rapture itself.

The Dispensationalist program for the end

Daniel's vision of the 70 weeks (Dan. 9:24-27) is seen to be a key. Sometime toward the end of the 69th week the anointed one will be

²³ Lindsey, *The 1980's Countdown to Armageddon* (1980), pp. 15, 106.

²⁴ Lindsey, *The 1980's Countdown to Armageddon* (1980), p. 109.

cut off - this being a reference to Jesus. There then ensues a gap in the time sequence with the 70th week yet to be fulfilled in the future. (Each of these 70 'weeks' being a period of 7 years, 69 'weeks' are past but there will be a final 7 year period that has not yet begun.)

[This parenthesis - the break between the 69th and the 70th week - is absolutely key to the Dispensational pattern, although nothing in the text gives this indication.]

In the parenthesis the church age is experienced.

- At the end of the church age there is the secret rapture (church being taken to heaven), and then the final week begins to unfold. [There are some who hold that the church is raptured half way through this final week, so 3½ years into this final period.]
- The Supper of the Lamb will take place in heaven during these last 7 years, the presence of the Spirit is removed from the earth, and in this setting antiChrist appears and in the middle of this final week he comes and destroys the rebuilt Temple in Jerusalem.
- He will then gather the armies together to fight Israel and the battle of Armageddon will take place.
- Then we have the Second Coming of Jesus who destroys these forces that have gathered against Israel (and this is understood as a literal battle).
- Through the persecution that took place Jews will now be able to receive Jesus as Messiah.
- Following this battle the Millennial kingdom of 1000 years will be established with all nations subject to the Davidic king,

Jesus.

- During this millennial reign people will be born and also die, and some will not turn to Jesus, so that at the end of the period when Satan is released one more time he is able to deceive the nations, and there is a final battle (Rev. 20:7-9).
- Following this there is a final judgement, and eternity then dawns with the church enjoying God's Presence in the new heaven and Israel the promises to David in the kingdom on the new earth.

[There are variations on the scheme I have laid out here, but this is sufficiently typical that when there is another pattern that differs, it can still be seen to be shaped Dispensationally.]

The influence of Dispensationalism is strong and although there are those who no longer hold to a 'secret rapture' other aspects 'hang on'. Under Dispensationalism: the return of Christ is said to take place in 2 stages. First a whisking away of the believer to heaven – some 7 years before the end and during those 7 years the Supper of the Lamb takes place in heaven while on earth great tribulation and persecution of the Jews as the world ruler, the Antichrist sets up his one world government. Only after those 7 years does Christ appear visibly to set up the millennial kingdom, having dealt with Antichrist at the battle of Armageddon.

(Please remember that there is **no** evidence for a teaching about a secret rapture that will occur either 7 years before the Great Tribulation (the so-called pre-Trib view) or half way through the Great tribulation (the mid-Trib view) before 1830.)

The central ‘Rapture’ Scripture - 1 Thess 4:13-18

Once we read this we will see how weak the biblical basis for the rapture (as well as the forced Dispensational grid) is.

But we do not want you to be uninformed, brothers and sisters, about those who have died, so that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope. For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have died. For this we declare to you by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will by no means precede those who have died. For the Lord himself, with a cry of command, with the archangel's call and with the sound of God's trumpet, will descend from heaven, and the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up in the clouds together with them to meet the Lord in the air, and so we will be with the Lord forever. Therefore encourage one another with these words.

In Dispensationalism this text is supposed to teach that believers are caught up to meet the Lord in the air some 7 years before there is a public ‘appearing’ of the Lord. However!

This whole passage is to answer the **question** that Paul frames as ‘**about those who have died**’. He answers it saying that although grief is present there is hope, and that they are to ‘encourage one another with these words’.

He does not answer it with ‘no worries they are in heaven’ (this could be true but is not the hope of Scripture!) nor does he answer it with ‘we will be secretly raptured’. The question is not about ‘us’ alive at

his coming but about those who had died. We have to align the answer to the question rather than impose a system on the text that gives a non-answer to the question!

Why the question?

A Hellenistic approach would not ask such a question, for the hope that was expressed in that world-view was that anyone who had died had escaped the prison of materiality. (A phrase that summarised that view was '*soma sema*', the body is a tomb, hence death was an escape!) Sadly this has infected so much of Western theology and been exported around the world.

The Hebraic world-view is solidly focused on creation and the journey toward new creation. The hope was that God would indeed come to bring this world to its fulfilled state (the NT refers to the 'restoration of **all** things'). This then presented an issue. Those who were righteous and have died clearly are not present, even though their bones were present, so what does this physical restoration mean for them? They are in very real danger of missing out when the great reversal / restoration takes place, except... God is faithful and they will not miss out, but will be raised from death. The Hebraic answer was 'resurrection of the dead'; this was the hope, that hope being expressed very eloquently by Paul in 1 Corinthians 15.

Paul in this Thessalonian passage follows this same Judeo-Christian path.

Why the hope? Because 'we believe that Jesus died and **rose again**'. The resurrection of Jesus marked that he overcame the final

enemy and so those who are in him will likewise be resurrected. When he comes the dead in Christ will come also.

God will bring with him those who have died.

And this coming with him will be anything but secret! For it will be,

with a cry of command, with the archangel's call and with the sound of God's trumpet.

And those who have died at that coming will rise (first) and those who are in Christ but have not died prior to the coming (*parousia*) of the Lord will be transformed (here I borrow from 1 Cor. 15) in a moment at the last trumpet. In 1 Corinthians Paul does not separate in time the resurrection of those who have died and those alive at the *parousia*,

but we will all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed (1 Cor. 15:51, 52).

In 1 Thessalonians he puts in a time sequence, but when it all happens in the blink of an eye is he really trying to distinguish or simply underline that God will take care of those who have died in Christ.

Thus far I have focused on the answer to the question, but what about that verse,

Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up in the clouds together with them to meet the Lord in the air, and so we will be with the Lord forever (1 Thess. 4:17).

The phrase that contains the preposition and noun (εἰς ἀπάντησιν: *eis apantesin*) was part of vocabulary and culture of that time. When the emperor visited a city, colony or province, the dignitaries of that location would go to meet him at some distance from the city. This was a mark of their respect so that the emperor did not arrive at the gates as though his subjects couldn't be bothered to greet him properly. When they met him, they **would not then stay out** in the open country; they would escort him royally into the city itself. The emperor came with him into the city. He had left Rome and was arriving at (e.g.) Thessalonica and they would then complete the journey with him to Thessalonica. Pau is using language that would be understood - those in Christ who were alive at his coming would meet Jesus in the air... and then return with the one who had left heaven and was coming to this planet.

We see the same use of the preposition and noun in Acts 28:15, 16:

The brothers and sisters from there, when they heard of us, came as far as the Forum of Appius and Three Taverns to meet (εἰς ἀπάντησιν: *eis apantesiin*) us. On seeing them, Paul thanked God and took courage.

When we came into Rome.

The final destination? Rome. The brothers and sisters did not stay out at the 'Three Taverns'! The meeting will be 'in the air' and **the instant final destination will be planet earth!**

Is Paul thinking literally (an 'up' and then an instant 'down')? Perhaps but given this is all instantaneous any idea of a literal up and a literal back down is not something we should push. The heart

of it is that those who have died will not 'miss out', indeed if pushed they will be raised then instantaneously any who are alive will be transformed and all together will be one. The Lord is not snatching them to heaven, but the Lord who has descended from heaven (like the emperor who left Rome) will continue that triumphant journey to the final destination. In Johannine language,

See, the home of God is among mortals.
He will dwell with them;
they will be his peoples,
and God himself will be with them and be their God;
he will wipe every tear from their eyes.
Death will be no more;
mourning and crying and pain will be no more,
for the first things have passed away (Rev. 21: 3, 4).

God's dwelling place with humans (not described as humans dwelling with God) and death being no more (resurrection and transformation) lines up with what I have suggested is what Paul is presenting in 1 Thessalonians 4 and in 1 Corinthians 15 where at the last trumpet death is swallowed up (1 Cor. 15:51-56).

Beyond the exegesis of the passage in 1 Thessalonians we encounter an immediate problem for the Dispensationalist 'secret rapture' view when we turn a few pages to the later letter of 2 Thessalonians. The believers had received a report that the day of the Lord had already come, but under the Dispensationalist view the day of the Lord will take place some 7 years (some say 3½) after the rapture! If Paul taught a rapture the response is easy - it has not arrived because you have not been raptured! This is not the

response he gives. This would be similar to receiving a letter in August 2009 saying that October 2019 has already occurred! Not too convincing – and quite easy to refute!

This passage in 1 Thessalonians cannot support a ‘secret rapture’ belief and once this passage is taken away from such a position it is easy to dismiss other passages such as in Matt. 24 that ‘one will be taken and the other left behind’. Those verses are likened to how it was in the days of Noah when one was taken and swept away in judgement. Those chapters (Matt. 24, Mark 13, and Luke 21) are related to the Jewish war of 66-70AD when the Roman armies devastated the land and one was taken and the other left.

We could add into the discussion the parables Jesus speak of the wheat and the weeds both growing till harvest, and in his High Priestly prayer prays that they will **not** be taken out of the world but protected while in it. **So there are no clear Scriptures of a removal of the church from here – indeed quite the opposite.**

The evident thrust of Scripture is of his coming (not our going) and of our waiting (here) for a Saviour to come from heaven. Paul writes to the Roman city of Philippi using the analogy of the citizenship that those who were born in (or had obtained) that status, and they would certainly not have read it as a hope of escape from their location. He wrote,

But our citizenship is in heaven, and it is from there that we are expecting a Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ (Phil. 3:21).

Phillippian (free) inhabitants lived in a Greek city but they were

citizens (πολίτευμα: *politeuma*) of Rome. Their ‘task’ in Philippi was to bring the values and culture of Rome to Philippi. They were certainly not to live there hoping to get to Rome (and certainly not to hope that one day the emperor would come and ‘snatch them away’ to Rome!). Life might be tough, there could be opposition but the hope was for the emperor to come at some future time. That is the natural story that Paul is alluding to, and transforming it from a mere citizenship of an earthly city to that of being citizens of heaven.

When Jesus, the Saviour, comes **from** heaven a physical transformation would take place (3:21). Just as there was no encouragement to expect a movement from Philippi to Rome, Paul is not encouraging them with a movement from earth to heaven and if we take out the chapter divisions and continue to read the opening verse of chapter 4 it simply re-enforces that Paul was never encouraging those believers to hope for the ‘rapture’ but to be engaged within the city where they lived, to pray and work so that there might be some evidence of the culture and values of heaven entering the city (‘let your kingdom come...’).

Therefore, my brothers and sisters, whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, **stand firm** in the Lord in this way, my beloved.

We could describe movement from earth to heaven as temporary (death for the believer - for those who are united in Christ are joined eternally - and resurrection / ascension for Jesus (*until...* (Acts 3:19-21)), but the longing (hope) is for there to be a final movement from heaven to earth to bring about a culmination to the ‘project’ that God began.

Personal Conclusions

- I find no unequivocal support for a secret rapture that removes believers from earth in historical documents prior to the early 1830s. It is of course possible that this belief was held by a few, but *if* it was what was developed by J.N. Darby cannot be found prior to his formulations. It is also telling that in **no** historical creed nor statements of faith is there any hint of a secret rapture.
- The dividing up of Scripture is not what is called for by 2 Tim. 2:15 and the divisions that make the various 'dispensations' are something imposed on Scripture.
- Eschatology is related to protology, or in simple language all things related to the 'end' have a connection to 'the beginning'. Scripture is a story of God and creation, hence God creates and restores all that has been damaged; the end is told of God making all things new (rather than God is making all new things). The redemption of God draws all that has been to completion.
- In this story from creation to new creation there is a people who are called to co-labour toward the *eschaton*. That one people are given various titles and descriptions and it is a false divide to seek to give a different destiny to Israel. All of Scripture is centred on Jesus, the truly human one, the Messiah of Israel. (That is not stated to deny the uniqueness of Israel.)
- Likewise there is **one** coming, not divided into two stages. With resurrection / transformation as the outcome. Resurrection for those who had died in faith and

transformation for those who are alive at that coming.

- We are not to confuse a historic pre-millennial approach with the pre-millennial approach of Darby et al. It is apparent that many in the early church held to a pre-millennial understanding; for example Irenaeus was one such person who sought to refute what has been termed an a-millennial view indicating that both views were present in the early centuries.
- Likewise a belief in (the) 'great tribulation' can be, and is, held by those who are not Dispensationalist.
- Regardless of how one works out their eschatological view we have to be intensely practical and engage with the here and now as opposed to being full of knowledge as to time-tables. The latter has a history of moving goalposts and watching history unfold from the side-lines. On many issues a better eschatology is probably 'I haven't got a clue'!