

# No Dispensationalism Before Darby

William C. Watson, *Dispensationalism Before Darby: Seventeenth-Century and Eighteenth-Century English Apocalypticism* (Lampion House Publishing, 2020)

“[S]ome say it is novelty, and thereupon dislike it, but its ancients than Justin Martyr, its an Apostolical truth,” –Increase Mather. This is the quotation placed at the front of the book. Increase Mather among the dispensationalists? Well, that depends on what Mather means by “it”, doesn’t it? There is the whole problem with this book and its thesis of the existence of Dispensationalism before Darby. But, what does the author himself think? He tells us up front in his Preface. “My conclusion is that the ideas of Philo-Semitism, premillennialism, and even pre-tribulationism were more prevalent before the nineteenth century than many have supposed.” In other words: there was no Dispensationalism, which is a system of theology that proposes seven different dispensations of grace, that is seven different systems of rules for salvation, under which premillennialism and pre-tribulationism have to do with the events separating the sixth from the seventh dispensations, and with the character of the seventh. It is the earlier existence of Darby’s Dispensationalism that is in question, and not today’s Progressive Dispensationalism that runs away from its own roots. Without the dispensational theology premillennialism and pre-tribulationism can exist, but having a very different theological import.

Before we get to the matter of the book, we should note that the publisher messed it up. The book is full of typographical errors, the pre-publication readers’ comments have not been stripped out (we get to read Tommy Ice’s guesses and speculations), the Index consists of a single page with only the word “Index” on it, and there is no bibliography, which would have been helpful to have. This sort of result is what can happen when the wrong file gets sent to press. Consequently, one wonders whether the author’s text is in finished form. Perhaps this has to do with the author’s death around the same time.

Watson begins with some chapters of historical orientation. He quickly introduces some definitions. These could have been helpful were the definitions not of the usual tendentious sort favored by dispensational polemicists. He separates the schools of eschatology into, first:

“1. *Idealism/Spiritualism/Symbolism*: prophecies should be taken allegorically, not literally.” What! Three names for it, and yet all it does is take prophecies allegorically! What of the view that, just as Christ himself is spoken of in a veiled way in the Old Testament, so is his kingdom? This is not allegory, even if you want to stretch a point and call it idealism or spiritualism.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>This is a key point about dispensationalism. Dispensationalist writers believe that though Christ is spoken of in a veiled way in the Old Testament, his kingdom is not so spoken of, and any text about the kingdom must be interpreted with the greatest possible literalism. Then the doctrine of dispensations provides cover for this interpretational oddity by explaining that in these earlier dispensations people were saved in different ways, so Christ and his atoning work are not directly relevant. The kingdom effectively becomes the more important and unifying theological idea. In contrast, for Covenant theology, the Covenant of Grace is the unifying principle.

“2. *Preterist Postmillennialism and Amillennialism*: apocalyptic events took place in the past; the millennium is usually seen as the success of Christianity, starting with Constantine, and the Church will bring in a utopia.” Where does Dutch Amillennialism fit in here? Read the eschatological material that the Protestant Reformed amillennialists used to put out in their denominational magazine. They thought that the tribulation was about to descend upon them and that the Antichrist was just around the corner.<sup>2</sup> And what about the amillennialism that sees some of the Old Testament prophecies having their fulfillment in the future state beyond the resurrection? Why does the “success of Christianity” start with Constantine? He would not have converted if Christians were not already a numerous and influential part of the population. Why does the Church “bring in a utopia”? Why do dispensationalists attribute the work of God to the Church just when Postmillennialism is mentioned? And why call it “a utopia” in this context and not for their millennium?<sup>3</sup>

“3. *Historic Millennialism*: we are in the midst of apocalyptic events traced through church history; in the 17th and 18th centuries, most historicists put themselves in Revelation 11 and expected a later millennium.” Alright, but all millennial persuasions have had advocates that mixed in a large amount of historicism, older ones much more than those writing today. These mixed versions are more common than pure historicism, as Watson acknowledges when he says most expected a later millennium. Further, there is a secondary sort of historicism, found both in some amillennialists and some dispensationalists, that sees the seven letters to the churches in Revelation as a prophecy of seven ages of the church, with the dispensationalists finding the present to be a late state of the seventh Church age, thus with the first six fulfilled in the past.

“4. *Futurist Premillennialism*: apocalyptic events are yet future.” He divides this into two branches, the dispensationalists and Christian Zionism. (p. 3) Among his futurist premillennial options, he leaves out *Historic Premillennialism*, which is called historic because it was the premillennialism that existed before Dispensationalism, and whose advocates today generally hold to a post-tribulation advent as well. In the text of his book, however, he frequently, and usually erroneously, identifies people as historic premillennialists. These more often are historicists or people combining historicism and postmillennialism. In his recent book, Daniel Hummel emphasizes the distinction between historic and dispensational premillennialism, although he confusingly makes up his own names for them, calling them old and new premillennialism, respectively.<sup>4</sup>

Watson entirely leaves out a fifth,<sup>5</sup> and the correct, view, according to which the symbols in the book of Revelation, such as the beasts, the woman who rides it, etc. have their origin

<sup>2</sup>See, for example, articles in *The Standard Bearer*, in the 1940s. The amillennial Herman Hoeksema can be usefully compared to the dispensational writer Harry Rimmer, as both struggled to update their interpretations as world event overthrew their prophetic expectations.

<sup>3</sup>The term *amillennialism* only appeared one hundred years ago to distinguish one set of millennial views from postmillennialism. Preterist postmillennialism became prominent in the 1990s among the Tyler Christian Reconstructionists, and is mentioned by Watson, probably because traditional dispensationalists see it as the greatest threat to their position.

<sup>4</sup>Daniel G. Hummel, *The Rise and Fall of Dispensationalism: How the Evangelical Battle Over the End Times Shaped a Nation* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2023). See especially his discussions of George Eldon Ladd in the chapter “The Great Rupture.”

<sup>5</sup>There are, of course, more than five views. The most notable, perhaps, is consistent preterism, that holds that the apocalyptic events were signs of the coming of the kingdom, and that all were fulfilled in the events leading up to and including the destruction of the Temple in 70 AD, and the no

in Daniel's description of the empires of his day, and those following, but Revelation are now generalized. The beasts represent how all empires behave; the woman who rides the beast, the way all false religion behaves. We are given a picture of how to understand the action of the great historical entities, without having to use an abstract political vocabulary not available in the common language of the people. These are not predictions of particular empires or individuals who are to come, but of the general way that things go, in the midst of which God's people now have to live.<sup>6</sup>

Watson next plunges into the patristic background of millennialism, carefully avoiding current patristic scholarship. Curiously, for someone seeking any and every early occurrence of ideas that turned up into Dispensationalism, he mentions the seven ages in the world found in Clement of Alexandria, and that Augustine taught "various dispensations", but not Augustine's seven ages of the world (often called six ages as the seventh was the day of judgment) which was a prominent concept from his day right through the sixteenth century. He next comes to Joachim of Fiore, with his three ages based on the Trinity, but Watson gets them wrong. The second, the Age of the Son, was not from Christ to A.D. 1260, but began with Isaiah's prophesies. Both Augustine and Joachim of Fiore were very influential in their general ideas, and a good place to learn about this is Robert Nisbet's *History of the Idea of Progress*.

Reaching Luther, he notes Luther's apocalypticism. He says that the Reformation's "more literal approach to the Bible ... brought on a revival of apocalyptic fervor." (p. 9) But, beyond the fact that Luther called the "the entire papal system" the Antichrist, he says little about Luther or Lutheranism, turning instead to the Anabaptists as the source of "more extreme" apocalypticism, to which he gives a paragraph. This is the first big omission in Watson's book. Apocalypticism thrived under the Lutherans through the sixteenth century. The source for this is Robin Bruce Barnes, *Prophecy and Gnosis: Apocalypticism in the Wake of the Lutheran Reformation* (Stanford University Press, 1988). This great wave of apocalypticism was transformed, as the end of the century neared, into the occult wave in Europe that crested about 1600, and from these, the ideas traveled around Europe, including into England. The spread of these ideas is the background to the Puritan interest in the subject, which is what actually needs to be explored. As for the cause of this apocalypticism, it seems to have been the failure of Luther's recovery of the gospel to achieve a general acceptance in Europe and to transform the life of the people that brought on a wave of pessimistic reaction.<sup>7</sup> In chapter 4 on "The Continental Influence" Watson gets into this German apocalypticism slightly, saying that "German apocalypticism spread to England by two historic premillennialists" but only one is from the period, Paul Grebner. The rest of Watson's continental influence is from the next century.

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prophecy remains to be fulfilled. Then there are the mixed versions, incorporating aspects of two or more of the major models.

<sup>6</sup> See, for example, the review by Michael W. Kelley of *The Presbyterian Controversy*, on this site.

<sup>7</sup> The failure of the Reformation to produce a regenerate lifestyle (that is a regenerate people living that lifestyle) in more than a minority weighed heavily on the early Lutherans, including Luther himself, and on the English Puritans as well. This is perhaps the most important factor in church history that establishment church history ignores. Lutherans mainly learned to live with this, accepting formalism, though there has been a strong minority position in many places promoting a sort of evangelicalism.

The next chapter is on “Reformed and Puritan Attitudes toward the Jews”. He tells us that “Increasingly, early Christianity began to drift away from its Jewish roots. This drift began in the mid-second century with the rejection of the Jewish Bible by the Gnostic heretic Marcion and culminated in the amillennial replacement theology of Augustine and the overt anti-Semitism of Ambrose of Milan and John Chrysostom.” (p. 13) One can hardly find a cruder version of the dispensationalist view of the history of doctrine: Marcion’s gnosticism leads to Augustine’s amillennialism. Then he reaches into the nineteenth century for the propaganda term “anti-Semitism.” He quickly reaches Luther and Calvin, who did not expect a general conversion of the Jews, to Beza and to many English writers who did, the latter perhaps, he suggests, under the influence of the notes in the Geneva Bible.

In fact, he finds a great many people who expected the conversion of the Jews. He says that this is because people were reading the Bible for themselves, and interpreting it literally. This is quite likely. At this time many people could at last read the Bible, and much of the English clergy were ignorant or indifferent, simply filling a position. Such clergy were not teaching the people; some seldom preached at all. The result was a great many naive Bible readers, which meant in turn, along with millennial ideas, a proliferation of sects. It takes time for people to learn to compare texts and begin to understand things systematically. But is this Biblical naivete a good thing? Insofar as it led to the foolish decision to bring the Jews into England, it was not. They did not, after all, convert. Instead, it created a population element permanently hostile to Christianity and Christian culture. But however many people entertained an expectation of a general Jewish conversion, even as an inauguration of the millennium, a premillennial Jewish conversion is not at all the same thing as a premillennial return of Christ, and Jewish conversion has long been a feature of many postmillennial theories, and especially at that period. Watson is really making the case for postmillennialism as a mainstream view.

More interesting is Watson’s account of certain naive characters such as the Dutchman Petrus Serrarius, who raised funds for Jews in Palestine, having let the rabbis convince them that the Jews were interested in Christianity and held similar ideas. Also rumors circulated that the Jews were planning, and actually carrying out, a great invasion of the Levant, and were defeating the Turks. What this evidences, besides a link between millennialism and foolishness, is hard to see. But Watson concludes that “Anti-dispensationalists deny any future eschatological role for the Jews as a distinct redeemed people, and the most vocal anti-dispensationalists of late are theologians of the Reformed tradition. How surprised they should be to discover that many of the seventeenth-century Puritan theologians whom they admire had a similar expectation of the return of the Jews...” (p. 44) Well, no. Not if these Reformed know about the history of Postmillennialism or Puritanism. Actually many of the seminary Reformed theologians do not admire the Puritans, or earlier British and American Presbyterian or Puritan history or theology either.

The Jewish influence also comes up again in the chapter on continental influence. The rabbi Menasseh ben Israel was able to play off the eschatological delusions of the Puritans to gain the admittance of the Jews to England. At the same time, he let it be known that he was raising funds for the return of the Jews to the Holy Land, and attracted English support for the endeavor. Watson says “The result was a new millennial strain in English theology.... And over the next 300 years, it was manifested as a persistent desire to assist Jews in a return to the Promised Land, culminating in the Balfour Declaration of 1917, and the



establishment of the state of Israel in 1948.” (p. 75)<sup>8</sup> As what ben Israel was really doing was getting the Jews into England, his avowed Holy Land plan seems like a scam. Watson admits that even regarding a Jewish return to Palestine, ben Israel told a German correspondent that “it would be the Jewish Messiah, and that the Jews would rule from Jerusalem over the other, vanquished nations of the earth.” (p. 76) So while deluding the postmillennial Puritans, the Jews clung to their exclusivism and hatred of other peoples.

His third chapter is on the rise of premillennialism in early Stuart England. What Watson can manage here is to recount the ideas of many historicists. As historicism sees the fulfillment of prophecy in the ongoing history of the church, and as the history is not over yet, it can consistently leave some of the prophecies still to be fulfilled in the future. The last figure in this story is a certain Thomas Goodwin, whom Watson calls “an historic premillennialist.” (p. 62) Watson quotes him at the end of the chapter in what looks like a premillennial idea: “Then the Beast and the False Prophet.. would be thrown into the lake of fire, followed by ‘Jesus Christ reigning gloriously.” (p. 65) He follows this with the conclusion: “What followed in the early seventeenth century was a move from medieval Roman Catholic millennialism to premillennialism.” But wait! Thomas Goodwin appears again in chapter 5 on the Fifth Monarchy men as one of them. The Fifth Monarchy men were aggressive postmillennialists. In that chapter Watson also introduces Robert Manton, who “began formulating his premillennial ideas while at Oxford in the 1620s” and who is supposed to have influenced the rise of the Fifth Monarchy teaching. Manton seems actually to be a real historical premillennialist holding that Christ would return to earth with his saints, to reign, and the new earth would come after this reign. (p. 84)<sup>9</sup>

In chapter 5, Watson makes the curious comment: “Jewish expositors of the book of Daniel (which is in the Hebrew, not the Christian, canon) saw no difference between pagan and Christian Rome.” (p. 81) Since when is Daniel not in the Christian canon?

With chapter 6 Watson takes up the concept of dispensations.

Contemporary Reformed theology advocates insist that Dispensationalism is something new, “only dating back to the nineteenth century,” and that the idea of dividing sacred history into dispensations was first conceived by British evangelist John Nelson Darby. Even graduates of historically dispensationalist seminaries, such as Craig Blaising from Dallas Theological Seminary, insist that “Dispensationalism first took shape in the Brethren Movement in early nineteenth century Britain.” While Blaising may mean that the comprehensive system known as Dispensationalism began with the Plymouth Brethren, surely the dividing of sacred history into periods, or dispensations, is much older. It can be found in primitive form in the early church and had become quite well developed by the seventeenth century. It may not be the exact dispensational scheme of Darby, but it was surely a forerunner.

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<sup>8</sup> For Arthur Balfour’s real goals and allegiance as a member of the Milner group, a crony of Lord Rothchild, and part of what is today called the Deep State, see Gerry Docherty and Jim Macgregor, *Hidden History: The Secret Origins of the First World War* (Edinburgh and London: Mainstream Publishing, 2013). See index for multiple discussions of Balfour’s activities.

<sup>9</sup> Note that Christ returning *with his saints to reign*, is an historic premillennial, not a dispensationist idea, as the dispensationalist regard the millennium as a Jewish kingdom, separated from God’s program for the Church.

Since ancient times, nobody denies that history was broken up into periods. See Robert Nisbet's *History of the Idea of Progress* on this. It was a pagan idea, adapted by church fathers in their theology. Second, the term "dispensation" was a known word with a useful meaning, or Darby would not have found it suitable to express his theological system. Thus, this previous meaning was not only "not the exact dispensational scheme of Darby" but something completely different, as Darby broke history into periods for the purpose of expressing his theological scheme of changing rules of salvation, which among other things separated the church from the Jews. Therefore Darby's dispensations carried a lot of theological meaning that earlier uses of the term did not. Not to be missed is Watson's sly description of Darby as a "British evangelist". Darby was an inventor of a novel ecclesiology, and his "evangelism" consisted in spreading this idea to existing Christians to get them into his own group, in which there was to be no clergy, no order of services, but only people spontaneously following the leading of the Holy Spirit. All others were the "ruined" church that would not be raptured and would go through the tribulation.<sup>10</sup>

Watson reviews various schemes to divide history into ages, noting a 1599 account of Augustine's division. A better source would be Paul Archambault, "The Ages of Man and the Ages of the World, A Study of Two Traditions" *Revue d'Etudes Augustiniennes Et Patristiques*, 12 (3-4):193-228 (1966). (Online at: <https://www.brepolonline.net/doi/pdf/10.1484/J.REA.5.104121>) which gives the evolution of this scheme, and its subsequent history as well. In reviewing the history of these period schemes in seventeenth-century England, Watson actually raises an interesting point. Francis Rous (1569-1659) and John Smith (1618-1652) ... no longer used the word "dispensation" solely as a special papal allowance or divine exemption, but as a general blessing from God to humans. Perhaps George Walker (1581-1651) was the first to use "dispensation" in the manner used by modern dispensationalists." i.e. "God's severall dispensations of the misteries of salvation and swuerall ways of reueling Christ in the Old and New Testament, and before and after the coming of Christ in the flesh." In other words, these are periods marked off by covenants, which introduce a legal change, a dispensation. The idea of a dispensation is more than an idea of a period, as it implies an underling governing change. Watson then stretches his point with the following:

In describing dispensations, Walker used the same terms as did Darby two hundred years later considering Adam and Eve prior to their sin as being in "the state of Innocency." He believed the time from Moses to Christ as being "under the law" and "the first covenant or works," and the time since Christ as being "the state of Grace." (p. 107)

In short, Walker used these terms in the same way that everybody else did, and it had nothing to do with Darby, who simply appropriated familiar vocabulary to label his dispensations, which were based on very different theological distinctions. This is not to say that Walker's *theology* was shared by everybody. The Reformed Covenant theology saw two basic covenants. The first, the Covenant of Works made by God with Adam, was broken in the Fall, and God brought the Covenant of Grace to restore his purpose in creation. The various covenants recorded in Scripture are or else fit into this Covenant of Grace which provides a unity to God's program in Scriptures. Dispensationalism denies this unity and sees mankind lurching from covenant to covenant as these come and go. Walker, as Watson

<sup>10</sup> For Darby's ideas and who was attracted to them see Donald Harman Akenson, *Discovering the End of Time: Irish Evangelicals in the Age of Daniel O'Connell* (McGill\_Queen's University Press, 2016) and Timothy C. F. Stunt, *Elusive Quest of the Spiritual Malcontent* (Portland, Or.: Wipf & Stock, 2015).

represents him, seems to have had his own non-Reformed covenant theology. Still the underlying question is, when covenants are introduced, do they show the underlying unity taught by Reformed theology? That is, even if these are called dispensations, do they belong or not to the Covenant of Grace? It is the theological system not the term that matters.

Another interesting passage is Watson's discussion of the Westminster Confession, which "mentioned the various dispensations of God throughout history: 'There are therefore not two covenants of grace, differing in substance, but one and the same under various dispensations.'" (p. 111) Watson omits to note that this is an express contradiction of the theological idea of Darby's dispensational scheme, as the former teaches that there is only one covenant of grace according to which men are saved throughout history. Dispensations, according to the Confession, are not what Darby later meant by them.

Watson quotes a William George, a member of the Westminster Assembly, who divided history according to a scheme of days. But George's scheme is simply Augustine's, who divided history the same way, labeling them by days of creation and, using an old pagan trope, by the ages of man. (See the Archambault article.) He finds plenty of other people with schemes to divide history, sometimes turning on their prophetic expectations. The closest he comes to an idea like Darby's is John Saltmarsh, an antinomian, who had three periods of the Father (Law), the Son (Church), and Spirit (free grace and still in the future), which might imply a changing plan of salvation.

Another of Watson's inappropriate choices as an antecedent to Darby is Herman Witsius, the Reformed theologian whose book *The Economy of the Covenants* is still prized by Reformed theologians. Watson follows this with the howler: "Two years later, a fourth Dutch theologian, Francis Turretin (1623-1687), presented a dispensational scheme very close to that of Witsius." (p. 120) Turretin, the great Swiss scholastic Reformed theologian, whose *Institutes* are still in print, was no dispensationalist.

He finds several French theologians with schemes to divide up the periods of history. The case of "French mystic" Pierre Poiret illustrates how Watson goes wrong. He says: "Poiret taught that 'the external Means of Grace [was] dispens'd in seven different Ages of Periods of the World.' These were 'diverse external Laws and Ordinances at various Times' and we should 'comprehend the Ground and Reason of those different Dispensations.. different Ages.'" Note well the phrase "external Means of Grace". *External*, not a change in the covenant of grace, and so *not* a Darby type of dispensation.

Watson's conclusion:

The use of the word "dispensation" was not unknown to theological authors of the seventeenth century. That it would be later used by Darby and his followers is not a discontinuity of eschatological thought as so often portrayed. To the contrary, it is a continuity. The term was understood and used in more than one way, but it cannot be said or implied that Dispensationalism arose in a vacuum or as a theological anomaly. (p. 129)

What is a discontinuity is not that Darby used the word "dispensation" but the new meaning he attached to it. And Darby's doctrine did not arise in a vacuum, no heresy does. That is the difference between a heresy and a new religion. But it certainly was an anomaly.

Chapter 7 is “Concepts of a Pre-tribulation Rapture and Great Tribulation in Seventeenth-Century England.” Some words of caution are needed. A concept of tribulation occurs in most amillennial and postmillennial theories taking place at the end of the world. Premillennialists have two tribulations, one preceding and the other concluding the millennium. In the twentieth century “the Tribulation” has come to mean in people’s concepts the particular seven-year or three-and-a-half year period immediately before the millennium according to the premillennial view, and not these other times of tribulation. Second, the rapture is plainly spoken of by Paul, in I Thessalonians 4:17, and it did not take proto-dispensationalists of the seventeenth century to discover this passage. Furthermore, any view that regarded the book of Revelation to be largely concerned with future events (past the 70 A.D. destruction of Jerusalem), if it tried to make a detailed account of the time or times concerned, would attempt to put them in some order, and so the events of I Thessalonians 4:17 would be placed before or after the persecutions and judgments detailed in Revelation. This would be the case even if an amillennialist or postmillennialist was detailing the particular sequence of the end of the world, which could be a protracted affair, to allow the fulfillment of all the prophetic events. There was a lot of experimentation with these ideas.

Also, in the twentieth century, a pre-tribulation rapture is generally indicative of dispensational thinking, because of dispensational notions of what events belong in each dispensation, whereas “historic” premillennialists generally favor a mid or post-tribulation rapture as it is easier to fit with Scripture and not precluded by their theology. But in the seventeenth century when those dispensational theological concepts did not come into the matter because they did not exist, and the detailed ordering of these events was being explored by millennial thinkers for the first time, the modern eschatological implications do not apply to their thinking.

Just because these topics are discussed by some writer does not mean that the writer is a premillennialist, let alone that he is possessed of a post-Darby notion of a secret rapture, or an imminent rapture, or contemplates a tribulation in a dispensational sense as introducing a Jewish age. Finally, the idea of coming in the clouds is understood variously in these writers, and Watson does not usually call attention to this. It could be Christ’s coming accompanied by the resurrection, or thought of as a celestial vision such as Paul had on the road to Damascus, and in that way bringing about the conversion of the Jews.

Watson makes a big deal of the usage of “rapture” or its variants by various writers, as that is the term Darby employed. But like “dispensation” it was a word that was in use, and served his purpose, and Darby’s appropriation of it does not imply his secret rapture doctrine in its earlier usage. Among a few premillennialists Watson finds the use of the term accompanied by an idea of two resurrections, that is before and after the millennium. Then he cites several other writers, Jeremiah Burroughs, Ephraim Huit, Elizabeth Avery, Mary Cary, and Peter Sterry, without quoting anything that indicates that they are even premillennial. He next discusses Nathaniel Homes who sees the end as an especially protracted affair and who “explicitly laid out a pre-millennial scenario” although the quotation Watson provides does not prove it. (p. 142) Next is William Aspinwall, who holds that the saints will be taken from the earth to protect them from the judgment on the earth, but for all the quote shows us this may be the judgments that end the world. With Archbishop Ussher he is on firmer ground as he can show that Ussher’s dating schemes involved rounding out the seven millennia of earth’s history with “1000 years of paradise in



the millennium.” But will it be a premillennial or a postmillennial one? The long quotation provided does not deal with the millennium, and we only have Watson’s statement that Ussher was in contact with the premillennial Joseph Mede “and concurred in this eschatological scheme.” (p. 142)

He provides a lengthy treatment of Captain John Brown who he says taught a pre-tribulation rapture, because it happened before the events around the 144,000 persecuted by the Antichrist. But what is missing from this treatment is a millennium. From what is quoted, Brown’s eschatology seems like an especially bizarre historicist program, with most events still to come. This does not stop Watson from saying: “The things Browne wrote might just as easily have been written by Christian novelist Joel Roseberg last week. Those who ridicule Dispensationalism as a new idea need to read in the eschatology of the Puritans of the seventeenth century.” (p. 149) If they read in that eschatology they will find many weird things, but they will not find Darby’s dispensational theology.

Watson follows with rapture ideas by James Durham, again no millennium mentioned, and John Birchensha, who had an end time going on for years, but again Watson adduces no millennium, similarly for William Sherwin, for whom it seems, the rapture was a sorting out of people of different degrees of piety. Then there is Thomas Vincent: “Vincent cited the same passages that modern dispensationalists cite on the rapture at the return of Christ...” Well, what else was he going to cite? There are only a few of these passages, and they are what have to be cited to deal with the topic. Once again Watson quotes nothing to indicate that premillennialism is in view. Finally, with the American Samuel Hutchinson, Watson can show someone who held to a tribulation, a rapture, and then the millennium. While Watson says that Hutchinson cited John Cotton, John Goodwin, Joseph Mede, Jeremiah Burroughs, John Tillinghast, and Nathaniel Homes as authorities for a millennium, this does not mean that they had to be premillennial as opposed to postmillennial. Joshua Sprigg of New College Oxford held similar views. There follow more writers on a rapture or even multiple raptures, some expressing belief in a millennium to follow, and some not, or at least not quoted by Watson to such an effect. But none has the dispensational theology associated with these views.

A more interesting case, in that it shows Watson’s reasoning, is Praisegod Barebone, a Baptist lay preacher and a Fifth Monarchy man. Watson says: “Barebone was clearly a premillennialist, as he repeated the following passage many times in his text:”

Rev. 5.10. And he has made us kings and Priests unto our God, and we shall reign on the earth: it is not said, *in heaven*; For the world to come; it will be here below on hear and not in heaven, above. (p.169)

But that is just what the militantly postmillennial Fifth Monarchy men believed, and Watson admits that Barebone was one of them.

Watson concludes the chapter saying: “Very little of what John Nelson Darby taught in the mid-nineteenth century was new.” Yet in the preceding chapter on rapture and pre-tribulational teaching, he has found nothing of Darby’s dispensational scheme. That “very little” that was new, is the part that made Dispensationalism to be Dispensationalism.

Chapter 8 is about colonial Puritan premillennialism, where he discusses mostly combinations of historicist and postmillennial views. He opens with the curious statement

of a “belief common among current historians that Colonial Puritans placed their millennial hopes in America rather than in Israel.” (p. 179) His agenda is to insinuate that this is an either/or, and then by showing that these Puritans entertained the expectation of the conversion of the Jews, to suggest that they did not have postmillennial hopes for America after all. There is an online thesis that helps make sense of some of the New England authors. (*Kingdom and Church in New England: Puritan Eschatology from John Cotton to Jonathan Edwards*, by William C. Eamon. <https://scholarworks.umt.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=6564&context=etd>) Eamon points out that, on the contrary, “New England’s overriding importance in the advancement of the Kingdom was the theme of the first full-length historical work to come out of the colony. This work, entitled *The Wonder-Working Providence of Sions Savior in New England*, was written in 1651 by Edward Johnson. ... The proclamation was essentially a call to arms, commanding the saints to re-group their forces in the wilderness. But it also included instruction for organizing the foundations of Christ’s Kingdom.” (Eamon, pp. 41-42) In addition to this, Eamon notes the influence of Rabbi ben Israel, so beloved to Watson. Ben Israel speculated that the Indians of America were descended from the lost tribes of Israel. “If the Indians had indeed descended from the Jews, then the missionary work was related directly to the Apocalypse.” (Eamon, p. 47)

Watson has long discussions about John Cotton, Ephraim Huit, Thomas Parker, William Hooke, Increase Mather, William Torrey, Samuel Williard, Joseph Palmer, and Cotton Mather. Of these William Torrey and Joseph Palmer appear to be premillennial, from what Watson quotes. (See below for the Mathers.) He claims that William Hooke was premillennial, but everything Watson quotes would fit into a postmillennial model. Watson does have a further argument about Hooke:

At the same time, Hooke warned against the dangerous and radical implications of the postmillennial view:

But about this also they, who are late called *fifth Monarchy-men*, did err on the other hand, especially in two ways. First, by anticipating the time, which shall not be till the pouring out of the sixth and seventh Vials. Secondly, By putting themselves upon a work which shall not be done by men, but by Christ himself. (p. 189)

It is clear from the quotation that Hooke is talking about the particular views of the Fifth Monarchy, first because he names them, and second because he mentions views held by them, but not held by the usual postmillennialists. So, contrary to Wilson, Hooke is not warning against postmillennialism, and as far as can be told from the material Wilson presents, Hooke was probably one himself. Watson also claims that Thomas Parker was “an historic premillennialist”, then quotes many historicist statements by him, finally ending with the quote: “While Thomas Parker admitted that ‘Many Worthy’s’ believed in a ‘reign of the saints a 1000 years’, he did not.” (p. 188)

Eamon’s thesis also explains John Cotton’s views. John Cotton was a postmillennialist, but he spoke of the resurrection in a peculiar way, with one resurrection before and another after the millennium. This language might suggest to us that he was premillennial in some way.

The last resurrection, which Cotton projected far into the future, would come with the Judgement. But the first resurrection occupies his attention the most, for it would inaugurate

the millennium. The resurrection itself consisted of two parts, according to Cotton. Its early stages, the resurrection of “particular persons, ... lifted from a State of sinne to a state of life and Grace,” had been going on for centuries. But the second part was a resurrection “also of churches, when as they are recovered againe from their Apostatical and dead estate in Idolatry and Superstition.” (Eamon, p. 38)

So what Cotton meant by the first resurrection was regeneration and church revival. “While still anticipating Christ’s return, Cotton was satisfied that the Congregational way was the model for the millennium. For the time remaining until the return of Christ, Cotton foresaw no further fulfillment of the prophecy.” (Easmon, p. 39) This is simple postmillennialism.

Watson’s most peculiar discussion in the chapter is of the Mathers. He points out Increase Mather because he believed that there would be a conversion of the Jews, and for his criticism of Hugo Grotius. This is the second cameo for Grotius. He first appeared as one of the “Dutch theologians” who “held a dispensational scheme”; now he is the object of Mather’s criticism for being a preterist. Watson adds: “Grotius was especially suspect, as he later converted to Roman Catholicism...” For this peculiar idea Watson cites Mather, so perhaps Mather believed it. Eamon, in his thesis, follows his description of Increase Mather’s belief in the conversion of the Jews by “his caution in his discussion of Christ’s earthly Kingdom, disavowing any notion that Christ would reign personally on earth.” (Eamon, p. 87) But Increase Mather changed his mind and in 1710 spoke of Christ transferring his throne from heaven to earth. “Then will His Visible Kingdom appear in the greatest Glory.” (Eamon, p. 88) But this seems to be a transition within the millennial age, a sort of mid-millennial advent of Christ. However, Lowance and Watters say that “the Mather chiliasm placed the coming of Christ before the millennium in traditional premillennial fashion...”. (Mason I. Lowance, Jr. and David Watters, Introduction to, Increase Mather’s ‘New Jerusalem’, p. 344)

Arriving at Cotton Mather, Watson says he “followed the historic premillennialism of Joseph Mede and Mather’s views can be charted as follows”. What follows is a long list of historicist views, not premillennial ones. We recall that Watson said that Archbishop Ussher was a premillennialist on the strength of his agreement with Mede. Cotton Mather believed that the millennium was already appearing, and he set dates, expecting the defeat of the antichrist around 1700, and in 1709 he was still expecting the Seven Last Plagues to be poured out on the papacy. But he was most concerned about America’s place in prophecy, “That our Glorious LORD, will have a Holy City in AMERICA; a City, the Street whereof will be Pure Gold.” (Eamon, pp. 90-91)

Watson then turns to late seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century England in chapter 9, where he finds more historic premillennialism, usually mixed with a good deal of historicism as well. The most interesting of these people is Henry More, who had a highly developed chronology of future events with a prophecy chart to make sense of them. Watson gives a lot of space to Bishop William Lloyd whom he first calls the “most prominent person to influence historical premillennialism in late Stuart England,” and whom he says influenced Isaac Newton. “Both men were historic premillennialists”. But he quotes Lloyd as follows: “... when Christ should begin the Millennium not as personally and visibly reigning on earth, but that the true religion and universal peace should obtain thro’ all the world.” (p. 222) So Lloyd was postmillennial, not a premillennialist!

Chapter 10, on the pre-tribulation-rapture and tribulation in eighteenth-century England, opens with the bizarre statement: “Contemporary theologians often characterize premillennialism before Darby as only historical premillennialism and not futurist premillennialism.” (p. 225) But historical premillennialism is futurist. Historical premillennialists do not hold to dispensational theology, so they dispense with the secret rapture before the tribulation, and the contemporary ones instead place the rapture in a mid- or post-tribulation context, that is three and a half or seven years later than the dispensational premillennialists do. This is because, not making the dispensational church vs. Israel distinction, they see the church going into the tribulation period. Both types of view see these events as equally future. It is probably true to say that historical premillennialists writing today have been influenced by the dispensationalists in the sense that the former have had to organize and clarify their ideas extensively to distinguish and defend their system.<sup>11</sup>

Watson then adds, “Historical premillennialists consider events of the book of Revelation as progressing throughout church history.” That is the historicist view, which has been held in the past not only by pure historicists, but by many amillennial, premillennial and post-millennial advocates, in addition to their millennial ideas. That is much less so today, because these historical identifications have been so wrong and so silly so frequently, that almost everyone has been cured of this type of thinking. The pure form of historicism is not a millennial view at all, as it seeks to avoid millennial thinking by making prophecies apply to ordinary events of history as they have been occurring since the times of the apostles. While on the subject, we can mention that there has been a sort of hyper-historicism among some adventist writers, that tried to interpret even the pastoral admonitions in the New Testament epistles as prophecies of some controversy or heresy that is to arise in later centuries.

But what are we to make of Watson’s comments? Evidently he has not gotten straight the ABCs of the basic eschatological schools, and this accounts for many of his mistaken identifications of the millennial positions of the people he discusses. His mistakes about Reformed theologians fit in here too. He has been inhabiting some theological ghetto where the people do not know about these things. Watson could have traveled across town from his Colorado Christian University to Denver Seminary and had a chat with Dr. Craig Blomberg, co-editor of *A Case for Historic Premillennialism*.

The writers covered in this chapter generally represent a more varied and weirder range of eschatological ideas. He gives Increase Mather another outing, in which he tries to find more than is there in Mather’s account of the resurrection (“everyone in his own order”) and the day of judgment. Mather portrays this as an orderly affair where each group comes out of its graves in turn, and Watson tries to make multiple resurrections out of this. Then it is Cotton Mather’s turn again. Watson tries to claim that Cotton Mather “presented a pre-wrath rapture”. (p. 246) Now this term, pre-wrath rapture, is a technical term in premillennialism, indicating a mid-tribulation rapture. But Cotton Mather is trying to explain how people are removed from the partial judgment on the earth so that they can be alive there afterward.

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<sup>11</sup> See the works of George Eldon Ladd as representative of those who started as dispensationalists, but discarded this to work out an historical premillennial theology.



Next, in chapter eleven, comes eighteenth century premillennial philo-Semitism versus preterist anti-Semitism. It reviews people who believed in the conversion of the Jews, especially if they believed in their return to Palestine. These are the “philo-Semites” (even if they are not premillennial) and the anti-Semites are the people who did not believe this, especially if they thought that A.D. 70 was a judgment on Jerusalem. Particularly singled out for condemnation is William Whiston, who had the effrontery to allude to Jesus’ parable of wise and foolish virgins, and even worse the destruction of Jerusalem. Never mind that Jesus said it before he did. In the good guy parade, however, there is Joseph Priestley “both a scientist and a theologian, who also believed that ... ‘the Jews shall return to their own country...’” (p. 274) Watson omits to mention that Priestley was a Socinian and a postmillennialist.

Chapter 12 is even worse. It concerns historic premillennialism and the growth of preterism in the Enlightenment. He starts out with Isaac Newton. “Newton was an adamant student of biblical prophecy and spent as much time on eschatological studies as on scientific studies.” (p. 281) This is highly doubtful. The reason is that Newton engaged in so much more. Besides his science, he was trying to discover the laws of history, he was revising theology, he was gathering New Testament Greek manuscripts to investigate his conspiracy theory that Athanasias, Jerome and the Pope had combined to foist upon the world a set of novel doctrines—monasticism, the Trinity and papal supremacy—that constituted the essentials of later Roman Catholicism, and above all he was deeply immersed in alchemy. There just wasn’t that much time left for eschatology. Besides Newton, Watson considers William Whiston.

Lest one think the age of reason abandoned eschatology, it should be remembered that both Isaac Newton and William Whiston were major figures in the early British Enlightenment. Their rigorous quest for truth led them to be suspected of heterodoxy, but they went where they believed truth led them, despite the consequences. For example, in 1710, Whiston lost his professorship at the University of Cambridge for questioning the Trinity and his support of Arianism. (p. 284)

How is this? Arianism is the denial of the Trinity, not just the questioning of it. Newton also denied the Trinity, though he disliked Arius’s approach, considering it to be too philosophical instead of exegetical. At least these heroes of the faith did not deny the national conversion of the Jews! That would have made them anti-Semitic, unlike all the Jews who don’t believe it either!

A few pages later Grotius, Thomas Hobbes and Cotton Mather are taken out for another trot.

The seventeenth century saw the first glimmer of preterism, the idea that prophetic passages in the New Testament had already occurred, as explained by events in the first century. Preterism could easily exist alongside postmillennialism, the idea that we should not expect any future Apocalypse. All the first preterists were Roman Catholic, and the first Protestant preterist was Hugo Grotius, who was reaching out to Rome in an attempt to bring natural law theory into Protestantism. From 1640 to 1645, both Grotius and Thomas Hobbes were in Paris, Grotius as an ambassador and Hobbes as an exile. Both were writing on natural law theory so surely had some contact with each other. In *Leviathan*, Hobbes repeatedly questioned the accuracy of the Bible, which led to claims that he was an atheist. Preterism

was later adopted by Henry Hammond, Richard Baxter, Daniel Whitby, and even Cotton Mather felt their influence. (p. 287)

First, postmillennialism is not the idea that we should not expect any future Apocalypse. Postmillennialism is the idea that Christ will return after the millennium, and therefore that the apocalyptic events associated with the return of Christ, including the final great Satanic-inspired rebellion, will occur at that time. Hugo Grotius was not reaching out to Rome in an attempt to bring natural law theory into Protestantism. Grotius got involved in natural law through legal work in 1604, which was incorporated into his publication *Mare Liberum* in 1609. He was deeply involved in politics as a member of the Arminian faction, and as a result, was given a life sentence for treason for involvement in an attempt to raise a militia against the head of state. He escaped after two years but while in prison began writing the natural law work that made him famous. When, much later, he was in Paris as the Swedish ambassador, he was an internationally admired figure (which is why he got the job). His *Via ad Pacem Ecclesiasticam*, which is probably what Watson is thinking of, came out in 1642 late in his career, in response to the Thirty Years War. Hobbes, at the time, was still a nobody, and why should they meet? There was plenty in his writings to arouse suspicion about Hobbes, but the principle thing was his view that religion was just a matter of opinion, as it was impossible to know that it was true, so it was best to leave it to the sovereign to decide.

Watson's previous hero for believing in the conversion of the Jews, Cotton Mather, now comes in for criticism.

Cotton Mather (1663-1728), was always strongly premillennial, but in the last years of his life he lost his belief in the restoration of the Jews to Israel. In the years leading up to his change he had seen dates of the supposed end of times pass uneventfully. He believed that the veracity of the Bible was threatened by these false dates and by growing skepticism brought on by the growth of Deism and the higher criticism of Hobbes, Spinoza, and others. (p. 287)

What Watson cites for this is material by Reiner Smolenski, who is vague about who really was influencing whom about what. As for Cotton Mather, the problem is that he and his father had been expecting the overthrow of the Roman Catholic Church and the triumph of the gospel, thus beginning the millennium. All their expectations had been failing. Watson also says of Cotton "He embraced the allegorical amillennial view and began to think of Christians as having replaced the Jews in God's eyes." (p. 288). First, Mather did not embrace amillennialism, second, the amillennial view was not allegorical, and third, Watson probably doesn't know what an allegory is, anyway. Dispensationalists love to use the term about others' views, but do not evidence understanding of its meaning. Watson then says that Mather embraced rationalism.

The final chapters of the book trace a drift toward different emphases in millennial thought. The first is a trend toward a future personal antichrist. He finds several figures substituting some more local religious or political entity that they wished to malign for the pope as the Antichrist, which had been the dominant identification since the Reformation. Then there was a trend toward identifying the Turk empire instead. But beyond this, more writers began to argue for a particular individual person as the Antichrist figure, not a

system or empire. The chapter on the Great Awakening also shows more departures from the worn paths of previous speculation and date setting of a type more like adventist ideas of the nineteenth century. Watson is interested in their place in Methodism, and the relation to “enthusiasm”, despite John Wesley’s desire to stay clear of that sort of thing. But this reminds us of the strange absence of Quakerism (except for a quotation from William Penn) and similar groups from this book, with their vast body of prophetic utterances of the enthusiast kind.<sup>12</sup> The trend toward new and stranger ideas is even more pronounced during the Revolutionary period. Here, though the divergence from past millennialism is greater than ever, it is at the same time more familiar, as antichrist spotting and last days signs, of the type we associate with the dispensationalists, are becoming frequent, though as yet among non-dispensationalist premillennialists.

There is a short conclusion in which Watson repeats his claim that almost all the elements of Dispensationalism had appeared before Darby. “Perhaps the theology was not fully developed in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, but there were plenty of people who were speculating on how to knit together the many theological passages that later became known as Dispensationalism.” Not perhaps: Watson has not found the dispensational theology or system anywhere in the entire panoply of millennialists he has surveyed. The book he has written is not at all the book he thought he was writing. It is not Dispensationalism Before Darby. Rather, it is Historic Premillennialism Before Darby. He has shown the long history of the futurist premillennial views known as Historic Premillennialism, even if he never manages to identify what it is. This long history is precisely why it is called Historic. In addition, he has traced some ideas of periods in sacred history that can be thought of as early attempts at biblical theology.

So, to summarize, in Watson’s book we find:

- 1) No Dispensationalism. before Darby
- 2) A careful avoidance of telling us what dispensational theology is
- 3) A promotion of Zionism, that is, promotion of the return of the Jews to Palestine, as a or even the leading idea of Dispensationalism.
- 4) A disparagement of any reference to God’s judgment of the Jews, which so filled the parables of our Lord.

We see here a remaking of Dispensationalism. Not only have the Progressive Dispensationalists moved away from the dispensationalist theology and much closer to Historic Premillennialism, but the old line dispensationalists are now showing themselves to be ashamed of their theology and to be on the way to replacing it with Zionism.

In connection with this is another question. How can this book be so bad? In his Acknowledgments, Watson says: “I especially thank Tim LaHaye, Thomas Ice, Ed Hindson, H. Wayne House, Timothy J. Demy, Rachael Wilson, Amy Cole, and Kathy Decker.” Hindson, Dean & Distinguished Professor of Religion, School of Religion, Liberty University, also has an endorsement blurb on the back cover. Some of these are supposed to be the big guns of Dispensationalism. Have they come to this, that they couldn’t catch the errors in this book?

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<sup>12</sup> This is especially strange in view of dispensationalism’s appeal, once it was invented, for Quakers. See the case histories in Timothy C. F. Stunt, *Elusive Quest of the Spiritual Malcontent* (Portland, Or.: Wipf & Stock, 2015).

Although the book is bad, this does not mean that it is not useful. Watson has compiled a huge selection of authors, publications, and quotations on eschatological topics, and this can be a great time saver for anyone beginning research in the area, so long as he limits himself to the identification of the sources, and does not get taken in by the misreading of them. Watson especially has a problem with understanding postmillennial writers. As we noted, he has the notion that postmillennialism is the view that there are no future apocalyptic events. When he comes across a postmillennialist discussing apocalyptic events, therefore, he assumes that it must be some version of premillennialism, and this distorts his understanding of what the author is saying. For the readers, this means that the book will be very confusing for any who are not well grounded in the eschatological systems.

There is also a general lesson to be learned from this large compilation of material. If we wonder why the church has been so ineffective against the growth of a secular mentality and then anti-Christian culture, part of the answer is the amount of attention and resources wasted on millennialism.