

AMERICAN APOCALYPSE

ANXIOUS FOR ARMAGEDDON?

REVELATION TO
The Apocaly

Editor's note: Many fundamentalist Christians are convinced that a series of political and military events must take place before the Second Coming. Could the speculative biblical interpretations they believe eventually become a self-fulfilling prophecy? Stephen Sizer critically examines the reasons why some North American Christians support policies that may lead to a Middle Eastern holocaust.

Why does the United States have such a close relationship with Israel? Why does the Christian Right appear so influential in shaping United States foreign policy in the Middle East?

These questions remain inexplicable without factoring in what is probably the most controversial, influential and destructive movement within Christendom today—namely Dispensationalism.

While the movement can be dated precisely to the 1830s and

the eccentric theology of John Nelson Darby, it was the publication of Charles Ingersoll Scofield's *Scofield Reference Bible* in 1909 which brought his novel ideas about a failing Church, revived Israel and imminent end of the world to the wider Christian public.

By then, influential Christian leaders such as William Blackstone, James Brooks and D.L. Moody had fallen under Darby's spell and were organizing "end time" prophecy conferences across America, lobbying for the colonization

of Palestine by the Jews and the rebuilding of the Jewish Temple.

1. Dispensationalism Defined: The Seven Dispensations

The proof text of Dispensationalism is the King James translation of 2 Timothy 2:15, in which the Apostle Paul calls upon Timothy to ...rightly divide the word of truth. Scofield took this as the title for his first book which is a defense of this novel way of dividing Scripture into discrete dispensations.¹

Following Darby and Scofield, dispensationalists claim evidence in Scripture of seven distinct dispensations during which mankind has been tested in respect of specific revelation as to the will of God. In each, mankind, including in the sixth dispensation, the church, has failed. These dispensations began with Creation and will end, it is claimed, in an exclusive Jewish kingdom on earth.

These dispensations are seen by proponents as providing us with a chronological map to guide us,² leading the more fundamentalist to insist that the world is about to end.³ Scofield claimed his scheme was natural and self evident in Scripture, ...there is a beautiful system in this gradualness of unfolding. The past is seen to fall into periods, marked off by distinct limits, and distinguishable period from period by something peculiar to each. Thus it comes to be understood that there is a doctrine of Ages or Dispensations in the Bible.⁴

Scofield's rigid adherence to these dispensations required him to make some novel assertions to ensure consistency. In his introduction to the Gospels, Scofield artificially imposes stark divisions before and after Calvary which lead him to the amazing assertions that, *The mission of Jesus was, pri-*

*marily, to the Jews... The Sermon on the Mount is law, not grace... the doctrines of Grace are to be sought in the Epistles not in the Gospels.*⁵ Strangely, Scofield ignores the one division that is self evident between the Old and New Covenants. Mark 1:1 categorically states, *The beginning of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.* Scofield imposed divisions that do not exist in Scripture and ignored those that do.

2. The Dispensationalist Distinction Between Israel and the Church

Darby and Scofield taught that God has two separate but parallel means of working, one through the Church, the other through Israel. Darby regarded the Church as merely one more dispensation that had failed like the previous five. As Scofield elaborated, *Comparing then, what is said in Scripture concerning Israel and the Church, we find that in origin, calling, promise, worship, principles of conduct and future destiny all is contrast.*⁶

Lewis Sperry Chafer, the founder of Dallas Theological Seminary, elaborates further on this dichotomy between Israel and the Church:

*The dispensationalist believes that throughout the ages God is pursuing two distinct purposes: One related to the earth with earthly people and earthly objectives involved which is Judaism; while the other is related to heaven with heavenly people and heavenly objectives involved, which is Christianity.*⁷

3. Dispensationalism's Literalistic Hermeneutic

Dispensationalism and its prodigy, Christian Zionism, is based on a

particular way of reading the Bible in which all Scripture, and especially the prophetic, must always be interpreted literally. Scofield, who popularized and synthesized Darby's theology, also taught, *Not one instance exists of a "spiritual" or figurative fulfilment of prophecy... Jerusalem is always Jerusalem, Israel is always Israel, Zion is always Zion... Prophecies may never be spiritualised, but are always literal.*⁸

Consequently, dispensationalists hold that the promises made to Abraham and through him to Israel, although postponed during the church age, are nevertheless eternal and unconditional and therefore await future fulfillment.

So, for example, it is an article of normative dispensational belief that all Israel will be literally saved; that the boundaries of the land will be from Egypt to Iraq; and that Jesus Christ will return to a theocratic Jewish kingdom centered on Jerusalem. In such a scheme the church on earth is relegated to the status of a parenthesis⁹ a *Plan B for the Church*,¹⁰ ...a sort of footnote or sidetrack in contrast to God's main mission to save ethnic, national Israel.¹¹ Or as Gilbert Bilezikian has suggested, the church becomes the concubine rather than the bride of Christ.¹²

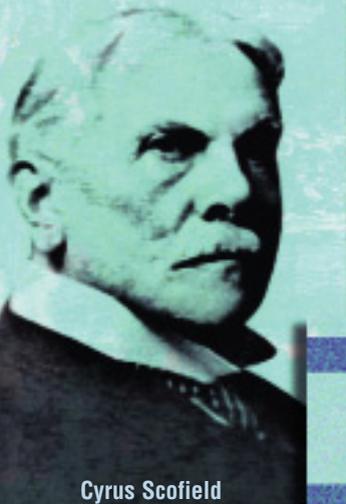
4. The Popularity and Diversity Within Dispensationalism

Today Dispensationalism continues to dominate American evangelicalism and fundamentalism. R. C. Sproul concedes that Dispensationalism is now ...a theological system

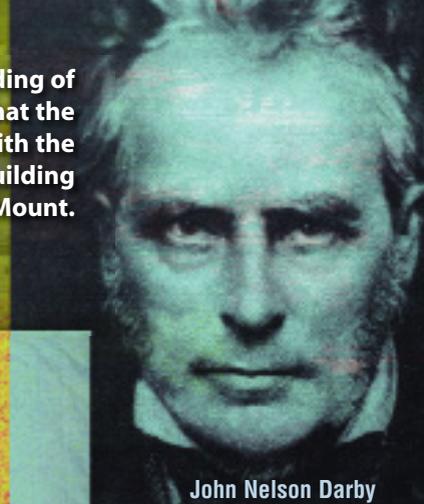
FOLLOWING DARBY AND SCOFIELD, DISPENSATIONALISTS CLAIM EVIDENCE IN SCRIPTURE OF SEVEN DISTINCT DISPENSATIONS DURING WHICH MANKIND HAS BEEN TESTED.... THESE DISPENSATIONS BEGAN WITH CREATION AND WILL END, IT IS CLAIMED, IN AN EXCLUSIVE JEWISH KINGDOM ON EARTH.... SCOFIELD'S RIGID ADHERENCE TO THESE DISPENSATIONS REQUIRED HIM TO MAKE SOME NOVEL ASSERTIONS TO ENSURE CONSISTENCY.

The Seven Dispensations

Name	Scripture	Responsibilities	Judgment(s)
Innocence	Genesis 1:3—3:6	Keep garden	Curses
Conscience	Genesis 3:7—8:14	Do good	Flood
Human Government	Genesis 8:15—11:9	Fill earth	Forced scattering
Promise	Genesis 11:10—Exodus 18:27	Stay in Promised Land	Egyptian bondage
Mosaic Law	Exodus 19:1—John 14:3	Keep the Law	Captivities
Church	Acts 2:1—Revelation 19:21	Believe in Christ	Death
Kingdom	Revelation 20:1-15	Believe and obey	Death



Cyrus Scofield



John Nelson Darby

Crucial to the dispensationalist reading of biblical prophecy is the conviction that the period of tribulation is imminent along with the secret rapture of the church and the rebuilding of the Jewish Temple on the Temple Mount.

These events are also seen as the trigger for the start of the war of Armageddon in which large numbers of Jews will suffer and die.

This is why Christian leaders are so zealous to ensure that U.S. foreign policy continues to be dictated by the interests of Israel without regard for the consequences in terms of Islamic reaction.

that in all probability is the majority report among current American evangelicals.¹³ Advocates include Jerry Falwell, Jim Bakker, Jimmy Swaggart and Billy Graham as well as some of the most popular Christian writers such as John Walvoord, Charles Dyer, Hal Lindsey and Tim LaHaye.

A new generation of younger dispensationalists among the faculty of Dallas Theological Seminary have attempted to redefine their movement as *progressive dispensationalism*.¹⁴ They distance themselves from what they regard as the "naïveté" of the founder's vision, distinguishing the traditional dispensationalism of Lewis Sperry Chafer and Charles Ryrie from *Scofieldism*, as well as from the popular apocalypticism of *Lindseyism*.¹⁵ They also regard themselves as *less land centered and less future centered*.

Following Darby and Scofield's literal hermeneutic and rigid distinction between Israel and the church, most contemporary dispensationalists nevertheless still regard the founding of the State of Israel as evidence of divine intervention, that the Jews remain God's *chosen people* and that the war of Armageddon is just round the corner.

5. Dispensationalism and Apocalyptic Zionism

Crucial to the dispensationalist reading of biblical prophecy is the

conviction that the period of tribulation is imminent along with the secret rapture of the Church and the rebuilding of the Jewish Temple on the Temple Mount. For dispensationalists, these events will signal the return of the Lord to restore the Kingdom to Israel centered on Jerusalem. These events are also seen as the trigger for the start of the war of Armageddon in which large numbers of Jews will suffer and die.

This is why Christian leaders are so zealous to ensure that U.S. foreign policy continues to be dictated by the interests of Israel without regard for the consequences in terms of Islamic reaction. The belief that biblical prophecy dictates the futility of peace treaties between Israel and her neighbors and that God will continue to bless America as long as America cares for the Jews is not only naïve but deeply destructive to U.S. interests in the world.

As Gary DeMar observed: *Convinced that a nuclear Armageddon is an inevitable event within the divine scheme of things, many evangelical dispensationalists have committed themselves to a course for Israel that, by their own admission, will lead directly to a holocaust indescribably more savage and widespread than any vision of carnage that could have generated in Adolf Hitler's criminal mind.*¹⁶

Karen Armstrong is not alone in tracing the pervading legacy of the Crusades on the contemporary Middle East, claiming dispensationalists *have returned to a classical and extreme religious crusading*.¹⁷ They are literally *Forcing God's Hand*¹⁸ and *Anxious for Armageddon*.¹⁹

6. A Critique of Dispensationalism

Dispensationalism and its prodigy, Christian Zionism, was born within British evangelicalism in the 19th century and has become institutionalized into mainstream American evangelicalism in the 20th and 21st centuries. While there is a commitment by some dispensational organizations to evangelize Jewish people, many evangelicals equate their faith with Zionism, becoming apologists for the State of Israel while ignoring the plight of the Palestinians.

Increasingly, Dispensational Christian Zionism is being perceived as a deviant heresy which is subservient to the political agenda of the State of Israel. In August 2006, for example, the leaders of the historic churches in Jerusalem issued the Jerusalem Declaration on Christian Zionism. It included the following:

Christian Zionism is a modern theological and political movement that embraces the most extreme ideological positions of Zionism, thereby

becoming detrimental to a just peace within Palestine and Israel. The Christian Zionist program provides a worldview where the Gospel is reduced to an ideology of empire, colonialism, and militarism. In its extreme form, it places an emphasis on apocalyptic events leading to the end of history rather than living Christ's love and justice today.... We reject the teachings of Christian Zionism that facilitate and support these policies as they advance racial exclusivity and perpetual war rather than the gospel of universal love, redemption and reconciliation taught by Jesus Christ. Rather than condemn the world to the doom of Armageddon we call upon everyone to liberate themselves from ideologies of militarism and occupation. Instead, let them pursue the healing of the nations!²⁰

Christian Zionism only thrives on a reading of the Bible where Old Testament promises made to the ancient Jewish people are applied to the contemporary State of Israel.

To do so it is necessary to ignore, marginalize or bypass the way that the New Testament reinterprets, annuls and fulfills those promises in and through Jesus Christ and his followers.

This is nowhere more evident than in Galatians 4 where we are taught that the promises made to Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and Joseph are fulfilled only through those who follow Jesus Christ, for they alone are designated the true children of Abraham and Sarah. Indeed, Paul takes Sarah's words of Genesis 21:10 and applies them to the Judaizers who were corrupting the faith of the church in Galatia. *Get rid of the slave woman and her*

son, for the slave woman's son will never share in the inheritance with the free woman's son (Galatians 4:30).

This article has attempted to show why this injunction should be applied today toward those who elevate Israel to a position of superiority above the Church. This is no excuse for arrogance or anti-Semitism, which we all should abhor. With sensitivity and compassion we are mandated to share our faith in Jesus, praying that our Jewish friends find their Messiah and complete their faith. However, any suggestion that the Jewish people continue to have a special status before God, a separate and continuing covenant or exclusive rights to the lands of the Middle East is, in the words of John Stott, *biblical anathema*.²¹

The fundamental question dispensationalists must therefore answer is this:

What difference did the coming of Jesus Christ make to the traditional Jewish hopes and expectations about the land? Was it the fulfillment or merely postponement of those promises?

Hebrews 8:13 provides us not only with a hermeneutical key to unraveling the dispensational case, but also explains Paul's vehemence at the Judaizing tendencies corrupting the church in Galatia:

By calling this covenant "new," he has made the first one obsolete; and what is obsolete and aging will soon disappear (Hebrews 8:13).

The destruction of the temple and sacrificial system in 70 A.D. fulfilled that prediction. The choice since then has been between two theologies. One based primarily on the shadows of the Old Covenant and one based on the reality of the New Covenant.

Dispensational Christian Zionism provides a theological justification for racism and ethnic cleansing, rather than a theology of justice, peace and reconciliation which lie

at the heart of the New Covenant. It is an exclusive theology that focuses on the Jews in the land rather than an inclusive theology that centers on Jesus Christ, the Savior of the world. □

1. C. I. Scofield, *Rightly Dividing the Word of Truth (Philadelphia, Philadelphia School of the Bible, 1928)*.

2. Charles Dyer, *The Rise of Babylon, Signs of the End Times (Wheaton, Illinois, Tyndale House, 1991)*, p. 189.

3. Gary DeMar, *Last Days Madness, Obsession of the Modern Church (Atlanta, American Vision, 1997)*.

4. C. I. Scofield, *Addresses on Prophecy (New York, Chas. C. Cook, 1914)*, p. 13.

5. C. I. Scofield, *Scofield Reference Bible (New York, Oxford University Press, 1909)*, fn. 1, p. 989.

6. C. I. Scofield, *Scofield Bible Correspondence Course, 19th edn. (Chicago, Moody Bible Institute, 1907)*, p. 23.

7. Lewis Sperry Chafer, *Dispensationalism (Dallas, Seminary Press, 1936)*, p. 107.

8. Scofield, *Scofield Bible Correspondence Course*, pp. 45-46.

9. John F. Walvoord, *The Rapture Question (Grand Rapids, Michigan, Zondervan, 1979)*, p. 25.

10. Keith A. Mathison, *Dispensationalism, Rightly Dividing the People of God? (Phillipsburg, New Jersey, Presbyterian & Reformed, 1995)*, back cover.

11. Michael Horton, "The Church and Israel" *Modern Reformation May/June (1994)*, p. 1.

12. Gilbert Bilezikian, *In a personal letter to the author, August 2006*.

13. Foreword to John Gerstner, *Wrongly Dividing the Word of Truth (Brentwood, Tennessee, Wagesmuth & Hyatt, 1991)*, p. ix.

14. Craig A. Blaising & Darrell L. Bock, ed. *Dispensationalism, Israel and the Church (Grand Rapids, Michigan, Zondervan, 1992)*; *Progressive Dispensationalism (Wheaton, Victor, 1993)*; Robert L. Saucy, *The Case for Progressive Dispensationalism (Grand Rapids, Zondervan, 1993)*.

15. Blaising & Bock, *Dispensationalism*, pp. 14-15.

16. Gary DeMar & Peter J. Leithart, *The Legacy of Hatred Continues, A Response to Hal Lindsey's The Road to Holocaust, (Tyler, Texas, Institute for Christian Economics, 1989)*, p. 26. See also Grace Halsell, *Prophecy and Politics: Militant Evangelists on the Road to Nuclear War (Westport, CT, Lawrence Hill, 1986)*, p. 195.

17. Karen Armstrong, *Holy War, the Crusades and their Impact on Today's World (London, Macmillan, 1998)*, p. 377.

18. Grace Halsell, *Forcing God's Hand (Washington, Crossroads International, 1999)*.

19. Don Wagner, *Anxious for Armageddon (Scottsdale, Herald Press, 1995)*.

20. http://www.sizers.org/articles/jerusalem_declaration.htm.

21. John Stott, quoted in Wagner, *Anxious*, p. 80.

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