



Dispensationalism

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Published: 19th December 2022

Durbin, Sean. 2022. "Dispensationalism." In James Crossley and Alastair Lockhart (eds.) *Critical Dictionary of Apocalyptic and Millenarian Movements*. 19 December 2022. Retrieved from www.cdamm.org/articles/dispensationalism

Introduction

Dispensationalism, also referred to as [premillennial](#) dispensationalism or dispensational [premillennialism](#), is a variety of futurist premillennialism developed in the early 1800s by the Irish Brethren preacher John Nelson Darby (1800–82) (see Ehlert 1965; Weber 2004; Gribben 2011; Ariel 2013). Like other forms of futurist premillennialism, dispensationalism is based on the expectation that Jesus's second coming will precede the establishment of God's kingdom on earth. Key features of dispensationalism include its stark distinction between Israel and the church; the doctrine of the 'Rapture'; and, in its later iterations, the role that the state of Israel plays in understanding 'God's prophetic clock' and the events that will occur in the lead-up to the battle of [Armageddon](#), the return of Jesus, and the eventual establishment of the Kingdom of God on earth. Due to the significance of Israel in dispensational theology, dispensationalism has been and continues to be an important undercurrent in politically influential [Christian Zionism](#).

Division of Human History

Dispensationalism derives its name from the way it divides human history—from creation to the final judgment—into different periods, known as 'dispensations'. According to dispensationalists, each historical dispensation was a distinct period in which God revealed himself and tested humanity. While the agreed-upon number of dispensations varies, the important point is that the current age, or dispensation, in which we live is the final age before the establishment of the Millennial Kingdom. Unlike historicists, who believed that biblical [prophecy](#) unfolded progressively over the course of human history, futurist [premillennialists](#) like Darby and his contemporaries believed that these events would occur in the future during a period of extreme turmoil referred to as the Great Tribulation. Although signs could be gleaned from current events that the present age or dispensation was reaching its end, the events they believed were [prophesied](#) to occur during the Great Tribulation were certain to occur in the biblical land of Israel, and could not occur until the current age was officially over (Weber 1988, 2004, 20–23; Gribben 2011, 84; Ariel 2013, 38–40).

Distinction between Israel and the Church

Another important unique and enduring feature of dispensationalism is the stark distinction it makes between Israel and the church. For dispensationalists, the Bible reveals two divine plans operating in history: one focused on Israel (as God's earthly people) and another for the church (God's heavenly people) (Darby 1972; Ariel 2013, 40). As part of this distinction, proponents of dispensationalism assert that God's covenant with Israel is still valid and therefore biblical passages and [prophecies](#) that mention Israel are still applied to Israel (i.e., ethnic Jews and the geographical area of Israel/Palestine), rather than applying to the Christian church. It is for this reason that the modern state of Israel is so important for Christians influenced by this theology.

The Rapture

In its origins, dispensationalism was a strictly 'futurist' theology. It was an interpretive approach to scripture that insisted that unfulfilled biblical [prophecy](#) would only occur in the future—at the end of the age. Through prophetic interpretations of the Books of Daniel, Ezekiel, and Revelation, dispensationalists described a future in which Jews, having returned to Palestine, would restart the prophetic clock they argued God had 'paused' when they 'rejected' Jesus as their [messiah](#). Only once the prophetic clock had been restarted would unfulfilled prophecy be completed (Harding 1994; Weber 2004, 20–23; Ariel 2013, 38).

In order to maintain the sharp distinction between Israel and the church, as well as a reading of the End Times in which Christians avoid the [Antichrist](#)'s violent oppression and other [prophecies](#) that applied to Israel, dispensationalists developed the theological doctrine of the 'Rapture'. The Rapture is the "at any moment" event that will lift 'true' Christians off the earth for the duration of the Great Tribulation that marks the transition period from this age to the next. As Susan Harding (1994, 22) notes:

By positing a pretribulational Rapture and by arguing that its date is not known and cannot be known, dispensationalists placed all fulfillment of unfulfilled Bible prophecies in the future and drew an incontrovertible line between Now and Then. As long as (true) Christians are on earth, unfulfilled Bible prophecies, strictly speaking, are not coming true.

Once the Rapture does occur, dispensationalists claim the world will descend into chaos, in part due to the absence of 'true' Christians providing a moral compass to society, and all unfulfilled [prophecy](#) relating to Israel, including the [Antichrist](#)'s violent persecution of Jews and the battle of [Armageddon](#), will be completed. At the end of this period, Jesus will return to earth with the Raptured church, defeat the [Antichrist](#), and establish the millennial kingdom on earth for a thousand years of uninterrupted peace (see Walvoord 1957; Lindsey 1970, 1983; Darby 1972; Harding 1994).

Growth of Dispensationalism in the United States

Although originating in Britain, dispensationalism gained its greatest following in the United States in the early twentieth century. During this period 'fundamentalism' was constituted as a coherent social movement, of which dispensationalism became a part through [prophecy](#) conferences throughout the early twentieth century (Sandeen 1970; Durbin 2018, 33), the publication of a series of pamphlets on doctrinal issues called *The Fundamentals* (Gribben 2011, 92), and the publication of the *Scofield Reference Bible*. Named after its editor, Cyrus Scofield, the *Scofield Reference Bible* was first published in 1909 as a King James version of the Bible that was accompanied by Scofield's commentary, which was especially pronounced in books such as Daniel and Revelation. It was through Scofield's commentaries that now-common dispensationalist terms such as 'the Rapture', 'the Great Tribulation', and 'the time of the Gentiles' as well as ideas about the future of the Jewish people were first introduced to large swathes of the American population (Ariel 2013, 74).

Prior to Israel's establishment in 1948, the above ideas were speculative. This dispensationalism, which the scholar Crawford Gribben (2011, xii) refers to as 'classical dispensationalism', maintained the strict futurism described above, which characterized the first two editions of the *Scofield Reference Bible* (1909 and 1917). Those two editions still identified the return of Jews to Palestine as an event that would occur *after* the Rapture of the church (although some Christians took it upon themselves to give God a helping hand—for example, William Blackstone, the author of *Jesus is Coming* (1898), led a petition in 1891, now referred to as the Blackstone Memorial, that called for American support of Jewish restoration to Israel; see Goldman, 2009). However, the creation of Israel brought some historicism back into dispensationalist hermeneutics, whereby Israel's establishment (Talbot 1948) and expansion (Bell 1967, 1044–45) were seen as the fulfilment of [prophecy](#) and events in the Middle East became key to understanding 'God's prophetic clock' (see e.g., Hagee 2018). Consequently, for Christians influenced by dispensationalism, as well as those who had been sceptical of it, these events were evidence that the Bible remained the authoritative source of knowledge about the world. They were also interpreted as a clear affirmation that the Rapture was close at hand (Weber 2004; Ariel 2013; Durbin 2018; McAlister 2018, 79).

Dispensationalism from the 1970s

Dispensationalism was further popularized and modernized by the publication of the best-selling nonfiction book of the 1970s, Hal Lindsey's *The Late Great Planet Earth* (1970). By merging the political realities of the Cold War and the oil crisis and a growing awareness of terrorism with theological predictions that seemed to be confirmed through Israel's establishment and subsequent military victories, Lindsey and authors like him interpreted the military and cultural threats of the time in ways that implicated them in dispensationalists' [prophetic](#) readings of scripture (Gribben 2011, 114–17; Durbin 2018). More recently, the events of 11 September 2001, the War on Terror, threats to Israel and the United States by Iranian leadership (especially under Mahmoud Ahmadinejad; see Shapiro 2010; Durbin 2014), and the ever-increasing calls in the US to engage Iran militarily have all been cited by dispensationalists to affirm the reality of their prophetic speculations and their belief that Jesus's return is imminent.

Dispensational theology received a further cultural boost in the late 1990s and early 2000s after Tim

LaHaye and Jerry B. Jenkins began publishing their *Left Behind* series (see McAlister 2003). The premise of the series was to dramatize what would happen on earth *after* the Rapture of the church. Consequently, as a result of the distribution of dispensational theology over the past 150 years through Bible institutes, churches, publishing houses, and popular culture, Amy Frykholm (2004) argues that 'the rapture is woven into the fabric of American culture, a part of the culture's hopes, dreams, fears, and mythology' (13).

A once obscure form of [prophetic](#) interpretation that migrated across the Atlantic, dispensationalism has had considerable influence on the shape of conservative American Christianity and culture. Although many evangelicals today may not identify as dispensationalists, the belief has had a lasting impact on Christian Zionism and the shape of Christian support for Israel, as well as how these Christian Zionists understand their agency in the world, the state of Israel, and the Middle East more broadly (see Ariel 2013; Durbin 2018).

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Downloaded: 2023-01-03

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