



## Thomas Spence

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### Introduction

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Thomas Spence (1750–1814) was an English revolutionary and millenarian propagandist. He was active in Northumbria and then London and left behind a dedicated cohort of followers after his death. From the 1770s onward, he became known for his ideas about ending landlordism and establishing local parishes with collective and democratic ownership of the land, both in Britain and the Empire. He consistently presented his vision for a transformed society in biblical, prophetic, and millenarian language and titles, such as Everlasting Empire, Paradise, Golden Age, New Jerusalem, End of Oppression, and the Millennium. He used the laws of Moses as a model for a new, landlord-free society. But he went further still, seeing biblical language, and attempts at applying it directly to new settings, as limited. While he looked to a transformation of societal consciousness, he also developed the idea that force would be required to overthrow the power of landlords and bring about this new society.

### Life and Ideas

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Spence was born in Newcastle to a poor Scottish Calvinist family; his mother was a stockinger and his father was a net-maker. The Bible was at the heart of daily life for the Spence family while reading was important to Spence, who went on to become a schoolmaster, educational thinker, linguist, and bookseller. Influenced by his upbringing, reading (e.g., James Harrington), and religious associates (e.g., Revd James Murray), Spence became a known figure in prominent radical and revolutionary networks in London towards the end of the eighteenth century. He was involved in debates about, for instance, the impact of the French Revolution, political and religious liberty, 'the rights of man', equality before God, and millenarian transformation, while advocating for the working poor over the exploitative rich. His ideas were already gaining traction in 1770s Northumbria, such as when Spence was involved in successfully preventing enclosure of land on Newcastle Town Moor, an issue intertwined with local and national controversies about political corruption and elective representation (Hammersley 2014).

In 1775, Spence was thrown out of the Philosophical Society in Newcastle for expounding his views on land use and landlordism. Sometime around the late 1780s or early 1790s, he moved to London and became a radical bookseller, associating with revolutionary, rationalist, republican, and millenarian thinkers enthused by the French Revolution. Spence continued to promote, develop, and defend his vision for a society freed

from landlord control in print, in debate, and in lyrics set to well-known tunes. As well as promoting his main ideas about the land and governance, Spence was involved in debates about, for instance, press freedom, anti-tyranny, rejection of the state church, and universal suffrage (though he did not extend gender equality in all areas of public life). He faced allegations of sedition and repeated arrests and imprisonments in the 1790s but continued pushing his arguments until his death in 1814.

For further details on Spence's life and times in modern scholarship, see, e.g., Thompson 1968 [1963], 176–79; Parssinen 1973; Knox 1977; Ashraf 1983; Bonnett 2010, 64–69; Chase 2010 [1988], 19–67; Bonnett and Armstrong 2014; Cazzola 2022; Dickinson 2026.

## Spence's Plan

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In his controversial 1775 talk to the Philosophical Society (the printed version of which was only rediscovered in 2007), Spence outlined his plan to transform the land by starting with the loaded Edenic propositions about commonality and basic human needs. He argued that “property in land and liberty among men, in a state of nature, ought to be equal,” and so the land for all people “in a native state, is properly their common.” Everyone has equal property and liberty to sustain themselves through animals, fruits, and produce. To deny people this is to deny them the right to life itself. This line of thought involved an attack on private property and inheritance, as ancestors have no right to deprive future generations of the means to live. The land, therefore, must belong at all times to the living inhabitants “in an equal manner” (Spence 1775).

Spence's starting point was common in eighteenth-century philosophical understandings about the origins and evolution of property ownership. But his criticism of what came next in human society and what should be done about it was confrontational and revolutionary. As the realities of human society differed from humanity's early state, Spence's 1775 talk offered an account of the origins of land ownership among a usurping few who acted as if the earth were made by or for them. This idea took deep root, he argued, and became received truth. Taking anything from or doing anything on the land required the permission of the lords, making them godlike arbiters of life and death, holding people as their property. Meanwhile, the common people struggle and labour and do not enjoy the fuller rewards to which they are entitled in this rental system.

In place of landlordism, Spence instead proposed that there should be devolved parishes (grounded in a limited central government). The parish would restore natural rights, with collective and democratic control of its own land for the benefit of its inhabitants. In Spence's proposed system, leaseholders pay rent to the parish. The rent is pooled and used for the collective, with dividends distributed equally to all, thereby preventing poverty. Industrious and enterprising people could accumulate wealth, and be given the conditions to thrive, but accumulation could not be done through landlordism and idle landlords living off rent. To make this alternative society work would require a change in shared cultural assumptions, hence anyone proposing to sell or give away land should be regarded in the same way as someone who sells their children into slavery or murders them.

Spence tweaked and defended this plan for the rest of his life, and he did so in millenarian language grounded in the Bible.

## Spence's Millenarian Bible

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It is difficult to establish the precise nature of Spence's Protestant beliefs as an adult. His plan for the reordering of secular society did not entail hard theocracy and was broadly in line with rationalist discourses of his day (cf. Knox 1977, 80-82). He was also critical of what he saw as delusional aspects of religion (Spence 1801, 32). Even so, he used the Bible regularly and consistently, as well as wanting to make scriptures more widely available to the poor and illiterate. As Malcolm Chase stressed, the Bible must, therefore, have been an authoritative source for Spence rather than simply a tool of manipulation to get his main political point across (Chase 2010 [1988], 46; cf. Knox 1977, 81; Bonnett 2014b, 75-88). Put differently, Spence believed that the Bible and his political vision said much the same thing, though not without qualification (see below).

Spence cast himself in the role of an authoritative prophet (both of the future and as social critic) and was a recognisable type among other prophets, visionaries, and millenarians in 1790s London (on the prophetic Spence and his context, see, e.g., McCalman 1997; Knox 1999; Chase 2010 [1988], 43-47; Davis 2014, 117-19). He used inherited biblical and quasi-biblical language to make point after millennial point about the transformed future. In his earliest work, Spence's utopian vision was that people in the world will "live like brethren," concluding with an allusion to the book of Daniel and biblical language of everlasting dominion to describe the great transformation: "what makes this prospect yet more glorious is that after this empire is thus established, it will stand for ever" (Spence 1775; cf., e.g., Psalm 145:13; Daniel 2:44; 7:27; Micah 4:7; Luke 1:33; Revelation 11:15; 22:5).

Chase's scholarship is essential for anyone studying Spence, but some qualifications should be made about his comments on millenarianism. Chase downplayed the millenarianism in Spence's early pre-1790s work ("no hint...entirely free of it"; Chase 2010 [1988], 28, 34, 38-39, 41-43, 46). However, the Danielic and other such allusions suggest broad millenarian rhetoric was present early on. What Spence outlined in 1775 was effectively the millenarian thinking and utopian plan he defended for the rest of his life, with the future cast additionally in the language of prophecy fulfilment, Paradise, Golden Age, New Jerusalem, and the Millennium throughout his works. Chase also raised the possibility that Spence was a postmillennialist (i.e., believed the Second Coming was due after the millennium) (Chase 2010 [1988], 47-49). This may have been the case given the silence in Spence's work of a returning Jesus before the millennium. But there is also silence of a returning Jesus after the millennium and it may be that Spence did not concern himself with such questions.

Spence's millenarian emphasis was firmly on his plan for the transformed social order. In this respect, the reapplication of the laws of Moses was an important reference point in Spencean circles. Leviticus 25—which discusses the fifty-year Jubilee and the return of land to its original inhabitants, release from enslavement, and alleviation of debt—frames the opening and final verses of one of Spence's songs (dated 1782) to be sung at the "End of Oppression" and the commencement of the "political Millennium." This will be the time when there are no lords or landlords and "God and Man will be all in all." Trumpets will sound and proclaim the Jubilee, and all the "poor oppress'd" will be freed from the tyranny of landlords. The same song also invoked prophetic celebration in the time to come as Isaiah 14 frames the third verse, declaring the "oppressor ceas'd," with fir trees and cedars rejoicing at a world released from misery. These ideas form a republican song to be theatrically and provocatively sang to the tune of "God Save the King" (Spence 1795).

## Spensonia

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Spence, who consciously worked in the tradition of literary utopias, used concepts such as 'Spensonia' to present more details of this alternative system. With the French Constitution of 1793 in mind, the Constitution of Spensonia offered further biblically based thinking, including the negative version of the Golden Rule—"Do not to another what you would not wish done unto yourself" (Spence 1803, 146)—to provide a moral definition of liberty. In line with the Spencean interest in the laws of Moses, in Spensonia there would be five days in a week, with the fifth being a "Sabbath of Rest" (the fourth would be market day and, for labourers, payday) to "promote cleanliness and refresh the spirit of men and labouring animals" (Spence 1803, 160; cf. Exodus 20:8-11; Deuteronomy 5:12-15). Such a shortened week would, of course, provide more frequent rest days than the conventional week.

Spence should also be seen as an Atlantic thinker, as Matilde Cazzola (2017; 2022) has stressed. Spensonia, we might say, offered global transformation as an alternative to the exploitation of British colonialism and its missionaries. Spensonia would disclaim financial benefits from foreign colonies while maintaining political links. With a potential problem of overpopulation in Spensonia through encouraging marriage and immigration, the creation of independent colonies should be supported. While maintaining a role for the geographical centre of the Empire, Spence envisaged building on the existing political circumstances to transform the world. Once established, these settlements would be in the "most intimate state of alliance" and entitled to the protection of the "Mother Country." The epilogue then offers speculative reflection on the benefits the international spread of Spence's message might bring (at least in the Americas and Caribbean). And this, too, is firmly placed within the Spencean eschatological framework because the full results will only be known at the "Millennium" (Spence 1803, 160-61).

Despite his interest in the ancient origins of equality of rights and property and his rhetoric about the natural state of things, Spence did not envisage his alternative as a direct return to humanity's Edenic state. Nor did he think that this transformation was open common land providing sustenance as sometimes imagined for indigenous people in America (Claeys 2014, 29). He did not even see success among those groups who sought a direct reapplication of the Mosaic system where land was divided into "small Shares" (Spence, Evans, and Tilly 1807, 8). Instead, Spence saw his own system as distinctive and so used the Bible in a forward-looking manner, helping conceptualise and prophesy a new society to address new problems, new economic systems, and new technology. For the Spenceans, there was a key difference from others trying to apply the Mosaic laws and similar historic examples (notably Lycurgus, lawgiver of Sparta). Applications of the Hebrew system did not offer protection against misfortune or against other landowners exploiting opportunities to take land from others (cf. 1 Kings 21). Spence and his followers believed their system was a marked improvement on such thinking because land ownership was shared among the community and could not be sold, while the rent dividends offered protection against poverty (Spence, Evans, and Tilly 1807, 4-8).

## Bringing about the Transformation

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For all the euphoric language of the transformed future and dedication to his ideas against the odds, Spence knew where the power lay—and thus where the prevention of the transformation to this better

world was strongest. He and his followers were convinced that controlling property ownership and ending the landlord elite was the key to ending exploitation. In this respect, Spence differed from some of the radicals of the 1790s, notably Thomas Paine. For Spence, compromising and allowing landlordism to continue would only maintain tyranny and exploitation. With this framework in mind, Spence tapped into the long tradition in English radicalism by using the biblical lineage of evildoers. Landlords, with their power and property based on plunder and bloodshed, were the “true Heirs and Successors of the ancient Nimrods” (Spence 1795, 5). Judas, the money man or bag-bearer, was unsurprisingly a type for the landlord in Spencean song. But for Spence and his followers, Judas also served as a general symbol of someone opposed to, or who had abandoned, the cause of transforming the land, including apostates who renounced the revolution in France. And, in line with the old tradition of the lineage of evil, Judas is connected to the Devil, Old Nick (Spence, Evans, and Tilly 1807, 3–5).

So how could the Nimrods and Judases, the hereditary tyrants and oppressors, be defeated? Like some of his contemporaries, Spence looked to education as a means of raising consciousness and bringing about transformation (Chase 2010 [1988], 21–22; 2014, 16). In London, and in the aftermath of recent examples like the French Revolution, he entertained a more violent understanding of the revolutionary seizure of power in the face of powerful forces of reaction, should the old landowning elite resist.

For instance, in *The End of Oppression* (published in 1795 and written just after Spence’s release from prison), he cautiously but clearly raised the idea that, in theory, an organised and disciplined military cohort might take control of all landed property. A committee of honest and intelligent men would then act as a provisional government. To help explain the potentially violent end of landlords as a class of exploiters, Spence alluded to prophetic language of divine support, judgement, and destruction of the wicked. If the old landlord elites resist, then the people must be resolute, “destroying them Root and Branch” (Malachi 4:1). The people will find a “strengthening their hands” (compare, e.g., Judges 7:11; Ezra 6:22; Nehemiah 2:18; Isaiah 35:3 [King James Version]) while the landlords would find their great resource—rents—“cut off” (cf., e.g., Genesis 17:14; Ezekiel 30:15; Amos 2:3). Unable to counter, the old landlord elite would lose their class position and become as harmless as any other (Spence 1795, 8–9). Spence used biblical examples of giant-slaying to frame his understanding of the landlord enemy. An especially striking use of a biblical hero to understand how to defeat the enemy in *The End of Oppression* was Spence’s follow-up attack on the powerful but ultimately “sham Samsons” which came with militant language of debilitation: “anything short of total destruction of the power of these Samsons will not do...we must scalp them.” After all, Spence suggests, if the Philistines had scalped Samson rather than merely shaved his hair, they might have saved themselves (Judges 13–16) (Spence 1801, 16–17). This argument, published in *Restorer of Society to its Natural State* (1801), was enough to have Spence tried for seditious libel and imprisoned for a year (for the details of Spence’s trial and imprisonment, see Chase 2014, 17–18).

## Legacy

Spence’s understanding of change was more revolutionary than many of his illustrious radical contemporaries in the 1790s (e.g., Thomas Paine, Mary Wollstonecraft, William Godwin). While he is not as famous as comparable figures of his day, he had some influence through his networks, followers, trials and imprisonment, bookselling, popular songs, and propagandistic tokens or coins. The questions Spence

raised about land use, rents, exploitation, commonality, 'rights of man' (a phrase he believed he first coined), overcoming existing power structures, and the millenarian framing of an alternative to the present system were the heart of the ideas of some of the most prominent radical thinkers of the 1790s. As Alastair Bonnett pointed out, Spenceanism also seems to have had the privilege of being the only political ideology outlawed by Parliament (Bonnett 2014a, 2). And the influence of his plan for millenarian transformation went beyond his lifetime. After his death and despite his waning influence, he left behind a small but dedicated cohort of followers, the Spencean Philanthropists. His followers kept his name and ideas alive through graffiti, publications, and even revolutionary plots. Spence's millenarian ideas continued to have some traction in radical circles well into the nineteenth century (on Spence's legacy, see Chase 2010 [1988], 69–152; 2014; Cazzola 2017, 12–14).

## Sources

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For collections of Spence's writings, see, e.g., Dickinson 1982; Gallop 1982; Bonnett and Armstrong 2014.

There are also online resources. The Thomas Spence Society involves a [website](#) dedicated to Spence and hosts a range of information, bibliographies, texts, and images. Numerous texts are also available at [Marxists Internet Archive](#).

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