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Dispensationalism

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Christ, “the prince of the kings of the earth. . . [He] that loved us, and washed us from our sins in his own blood,” and whose coming “every

eye shall see” (Rev. 1:5, 7). Here might well be the context by which all books purporting to interpret Revelation should be evaluated. □

DISPENSATIONALISM

The movement known as dispensationalism originated in the early 1800s in Great Britain, the leading thinker being John Nelson Darby.* Darby insisted on the literal method of interpreting Bible prophecy, a method that resulted in arbitrarily dividing the Bible into “dispensations” (historical epochs) in which God deals in different ways with humanity. Coupled with literalism was futurism. Instead of interpreting Revelation as a prediction of the course of history throughout the Christian era, as most students before him had, Darby insisted that nearly all of Revelation was written solely with regard to the last seven years of earth’s history. Thus, the book is essentially irrelevant to any other age.

Darby also promoted the idea of a “Secret Rapture”—to take place seven years before the close of earth’s history. Christ would come secretly to snatch up all Christian believers, leaving the Jews in control of God’s work on earth. One hundred forty-four thousand Jews would then evangelize the world in preparation for the visible coming of Christ at the end of the seven-year period. This scenario led to the conclusion that the return of the Jews to Palestine was necessary to fulfillment of Bible prophecy.

Herein lies the basis for Hal Lindsey’s—and subsequent—attempts to date end-time events. Lindsey believed that the generation that saw Israel re-established in Palestine in 1948 would also see the second coming of Jesus. Since a biblical generation is generally understood to last 40 years, between 1948 and 1988 Lindsey expected that the Israelis would recapture Jerusalem (which, to his delight, happened in 1967) and rebuild the ancient temple (which, to his disappointment, didn’t). Events would precipitate a Russian invasion culminating in a Middle East war involving Arab states, an Asian confederacy, and a united Europe. The failure of these predictions has caused many to question the validity of the dispensational method of



AP photo / Nati Hanik

An Israeli convoy evacuates military bases in the Gaza Strip as 1994 negotiations on Palestinian self-rule near their end.

interpreting prophecy and undoubtedly accounts for the lack of interpretive uniformity in the prophetic books shouting their headlines from evangelical bookstore shelves. The dispensational method also fails to account for much of the data in the Book of Revelation itself.

In addition to Lindsey, dispensational authors represented on the bookshelves are M. R. DeHaan, J. Dwight Pentecost, Tim LaHaye, John Walvoord, and C. C. Ryrie. A major training school for future ministers, Dallas Theological Seminary, is a bastion of dispensational teachings.

Recently published have been a number of telling critiques of dispensational method and theology. Among the best: *How to Read Prophecy*, by Joel B. Green, and *The Israel of God in Prophecy*, by Hans LaRondelle. LaRondelle's book has been particularly influential in my thinking—Jon Paulien. □

*As do most scholars, I use *dispensationalism* to refer to the movement that coalesced under the guidance of Darby, teaching not only dispensations but also a literalistic method of interpretation resulting in the rapture concept. In the broader sense, dispensationalism can be found in the Epistle of Barnabas (written in the second century) and the Babylonian Talmud (no later than the fifth century). In the 17th century, Matthew Poole referred to "old chiliasts" who divide earth's history into periods or dispensations.
