

## **Millennialism, rapture and “Left Behind” literature. Analysing a major cultural phenomenon in recent times**

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### **Abstract**

This article represents a research overview of the nature, historical roots, social contexts and growth of millennialism as a remarkable religious and cultural phenomenon in modern times. It firstly investigates the notions of eschatology, millennialism and rapture that characterize millennialism. It then analyses how and why millennialism that seems to have been a marginal phenomenon, became prominent in the United States through the evangelistic activities of Darby, initially an unknown pastor of a minuscule faith community from England and later a household name in the global religious discourse. It analyses how millennialism grew to play a key role in the religious, social and political discourse of the twentieth century. It finally analyses how Darby’s ideas are illuminated when they are placed within the context of modern England in the sixteenth, seventeenth and eighteenth century. In a conclusion some key challenges of the place and role of millennialism as a movement that reasserts itself continuously, are spelled out in the light of this history.

### **Keywords**

*Eschatology; millennialism; chiliasm; rapture; dispensationalism; J.N. Darby; Joseph Mede; Johann Heinrich Alsted; “Left Behind” literature.*

## **1. Eschatology and millennialism**

Christianity is essentially an eschatological movement that proclaims the fulfilment of the divine promises in Hebrew Scriptures in the earthly ministry of Christ, but it also harbours the expectation of an ultimate fulfilment of Christ’s second coming with the new world of God that will replace the existing evil dispensation. Though there are various ways of

understanding eschatology, whether symbolic or literal, it is a firm part of the Christian discourse. Characteristic of these eschatological expectations are motifs like the Antichrist, Armageddon as the ultimate war against evil, the millennium of peace, the return (or Parousia) of Christ, the resurrection of the dead, the final judgment and the return of paradise. These motifs are especially prominent in the Book of Revelation, perhaps the most important source of eschatological expectations.

Of special interest to many readers of Revelation was the cursory, enigmatic description of the millennial reign of Christ together with the saints that is mentioned in Revelation 20:1–6 which forms part of the end events described in Rev 21–22.<sup>1</sup> The literal interpretation of this passage gave rise to what would become known as chiliasm and millennialism, that is, a system of belief about Christ's reign of a thousand years at the end of time. This doctrine or belief, though for a long time one of several eschatological expectations, began to play an extraordinary role in the religious discourse of the late nineteenth and twentieth century.

The expectation of the end is not unique to the Christian discourse. Christian authors found its roots in Hebrew Scriptures in prophetic books, particularly in passages like Daniel 7:13ff with its vision of the Son of Man who shall come on the clouds. Christian eschatology shares some features with its Jewish heritage by taking over the millennium motif. Some Jewish apocalyptic texts expected a Messianic interregnum that will precede the end as in significant writings like 4 Ezra 7:28 and 2 Baruch 40:3. But eschatological expectations are also prominent in the Sibylline Oracles 3, the Psalms of Solomon 17–18 and Qumran texts. Eschatological thought permeates the New Testament. Explicit apocalyptic passages are found, for example, in Mark 13 and its parallel passages in the other Gospels, but eschatology is also a firm part of the gospel message of Christ's teaching about the coming Kingdom of God. Revelation reflects this apocalyptic mindset, but fills it in with unique details – like, for example, the thousand years of Revelation 20:1–6. The millennium motif did not escape the attention of early Christian writers like Justin Martyr (*Dial. Tryph.* 31),

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1 The prominent place of millennial expectations is discussed by Steven D. Aguzzi, *Israel, the Church, and Millenarianism: A Way beyond Replacement Theology* (New York: Routledge, 2018).

Irenaeus (*Adv. Haer.* 4.8.11) and Tertullian (*Adv. Mar.* 3.7, 4.10–11) who associated the second coming of Christ with a millennial view of the future and of end events.<sup>2</sup>

## 2. The flourishing and fragmenting of millennialism

Expectations of the end vary from time to time. Interpreters read eschatological passages in the bible in various ways and apply it differently to their contexts. The result is a plethora of interpretations of the millennium in general, but also of its various components, like, for example, the Antichrist, the timing of the second coming and the rapture.

Revelation's remarks about the future were read within mainstream, established groups in a rather low-key manner as referring to the completion of world history. This interpretation dominated the Christian discourse in many countries for a long period of time. The millennium is regarded as a doctrine about the “last things”, the future time when the final dispensation will be inaugurated and evil eradicated. Revelation 20:1–6 was understood symbolically or spiritually as having to do with the ongoing history of the church after the resurrection of Christ and the spiritual bliss the church will ultimately enter and enjoy.<sup>3</sup> This interpretation became known as

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2 A useful overview of eschatological expectations is to be found in Everett Ferguson, *The Early Church at Work and Worship. Vol. 2, Catechesis, Baptism Eschatology and Martyrdom* (Cascade Books, Eugene, OR., 2014), 213–243. See also G.K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation*. NIGTC (Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, MI., 1999), 44–54. It should be noted that eschatological views are not exclusively part of the Judaeo-Christian tradition. It was widespread in the ancient world, as is evident from apocalyptic texts that originated in other religious traditions during that time. For a broader overview of these expectations in Antiquity, see John J. Collins, *Apocalyptic Eschatology in the Ancient World*, in Jerry L. Walls (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Eschatology* (Oxford / New York, Oxford University Press, 2008), 151–69. See also Judith Kovacs and Christopher Rowland, *Revelation*. (Malden, MA/Oxford: Blackwell, 2004).

3 This position continues today, as is reflected, for example, in the following elaborate remark from an Eastern Orthodox author on a website that contains several articles that are critical of millennialism: “It is not difficult to see the error of the chiliastic interpretation of the twentieth chapter of the Apocalypse. Parallel passages in Sacred Scripture clearly indicate that the ‘first resurrection’ signifies spiritual rebirth into eternal life in Christ through baptism, a resurrection through faith in Christ, according to the words: “*Awake thou that sleepest and arise from the dead, and Christ shall give thee light*” (Eph. 5:14). “*Ye are risen with Christ*”, we read many times in the Apostles (Col. 3:1 and 2:12; Eph. 2:5–6). Proceeding from this by the thousand-year reign one must understand the period of time from the very beginning of the kingdom of grace of

amillennialism. It is commonly understood as the result of the influence of such major theologians like Origen and Augustine who rejected a literal interpretation of the millennium as Christ's reign on earth for a thousand years. Many mainstream churches ascribe to this more non-literal reading and incorporated it as their official view on the end. Where this was not the case, and groups preferred to hold on to a more literal reading, chiliasm as a doctrine was more or less tolerated as a personal point of view that did not compromise the major teachings of the church.

In contrast to this position, millennialists read Scripture literally as a document with specific predictions of the end times and events. Some boldly foretold a specific date on which the return of Christ would take place and the end will be inaugurated.<sup>4</sup> In their view there is a progressive unfolding of world history in increasingly evil phases. The millennium represents the beginning of the last, climactic phase when Christ will reign with the saints for a “thousand” years (Rev 20:1–6). They place themselves just before the last phase, because they are convinced that the end is imminent. Eschatological movements are characterized, therefore, by a sense of urgency that the “signs of the end” are present and that the Antichrist is about to appear for war.<sup>5</sup> In some cases the expectations run so high that believers resort to revolutionary actions to help inaugurate the end because they are convinced that they need to actively to take part in its unfolding. In the course of history, such revolutionary actions were the reason why millennialism was viewed negatively and dangerous.

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the Church of Christ, and in particular of the triumphant Church of heaven, until the end of the world. The Church which is militant upon earth in essence also is triumphant in the victory performed by the Saviour, but it is still undergoing battle with the ‘prince of this world,’ a battle which will end with the defeat of Satan and the final casting of him into the lake of fire.” See for this, Michael Pomazansky, “The Error of Chiliasm”, [Online] <http://orthochristian.com/86555.html> [Accessed: 20 November 2018]. He does note, however, that early Church authors like Justin Martyr and Irenaeus subscribed to chiliasm. See further below.

- 4 The historical development has a calendric quality, systematized with the use of numbers in Revelation, like 3, 4, 7, 12 and 666 and dates about days, months and years.
- 5 See Glenn W. Shuck, *Marks of the Beast: The Left Behind Novels and the Struggle for Evangelical Identity*. (New York/London: New York University Press, 2009), 42. He notes how, in the Left Behind texts, signs of the times were pointed out, even though their authors knew that they were still waiting for the end to come.

Also characteristic of these groups is that they relate Revelation directly to their own times and places with no or little regard for its relevance and particular meaning in its original first century context in which it was written. They link biblical passages about end events with what happens in their much later political, social and historical situation. They do such with much confidence, claiming divine inspiration and thus allocate special status to their own predictions. They communicate “special” knowledge that has been revealed to them as “prophets” and empowers them to unmask evil people, institutions and events in their own times. At the same time, they regard themselves as the faithful saints and elect few who resist evil and who will inherit the future bliss as reward for their faithful discipleship and witness. They see themselves in the role of the two witnesses in Revelation 11 that proclaim the gospel to the unconverted nations who oppose God and serve evil (Rev. 11). They also identify themselves with two of the seven churches of Revelation 2–3 who have a duty to convert lukewarm, compromising believers, including those believers from mainstream churches who criticise or oppose their convictions. They do not mince their words so that their proclamation is often a virulent, vindictive judgment of the church and world.

The dynamics inherent in interpreting biblical passages and appropriating them to later situations, contributed to the fragmentation of millennialism. This is shown by the different understandings of the end times. Except for the amillennial approach, mentioned above, there are various, even conflicting positions within the millennial tradition. There is a pre-millennium position that teaches that a millennium will be set up between the rapture of the church into heaven when Christ comes and the final return of Christ to judge the world. In contrast to this, the postmillennial view places the millennium *after* the second coming.<sup>6</sup> Matters are, however,

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6 For an early, but still informative discussion of chiliasm, see Johann Peter Kirsch, “Millennium and Millenarianism.” *The Catholic Encyclopaedia* 10 (New York: Robert Appleton, 1911). [Online] New Advent. <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/10307a.htm> [Accessed: 1 June 2019]. Also, William Masselink, *Why Thousand Years?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1930), 20–30. He spells out the position of Reformed and Lutheran opponents to chiliasm, but also notes its prominence among other German Lutheran groups. Masselink’s troubling discussion of the “Jewish” expectation of a Messianic Kingdom is, however, a sad indication of the scandalous, reprehensible depiction of early Jewish literature by scholars in the early twentieth century.

even more complicated than these three trajectories. There is a bewildering number of views on the rapture as groups hold on to a pretribulational rapture, a posttribulational rapture, a partial rapture, a midtribulational rapture or a pre-wrath rapture.<sup>7</sup>

The fragmentation is an indication of the many people who retained different understandings of the millennial. This fragmentation did not impede its growth. Interest in the millennium reached a fever pitch by the end of the twentieth century with the approaching end of the second millennium and became one of the most remarkable cultural phenomena in modern times. Wild expectations about the imminent end of the world began to circulate among those who held on to literal readings of apocalyptic texts.<sup>8</sup> American authors like Jack Van Impe, John Hagee, Hal Lindsey<sup>9</sup> and Tim LaHaye who promoted the teaching, became household names within evangelical circles in the U.S., but also among secular audiences. The immense popularity of these “Left Behind” books, as they became known, is illustrated by the fact that LaHaye’s 12 novels sold more than 80 million copies. These publications were further popularized through

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- 7 See for these, the contents page in Paul N. Benware, *Understanding End Times Prophecy: A Comprehensive Approach*. (Chicago: Moody Press, 2006).
- 8 Historical research reveals that similar hysteria existed at major calendric changes in the year 500, 1000 and 1500. See Pieter G.R. de Villiers, “Reading the Book of Revelation politically,” *SJT*, Vol. 3, no.2 (2017): 339–360 and Pieter G.R. de Villiers, “Reading Revelation from the Top or the Underside,” *SJT*, Vol. 3, no.2 (2017): 362–377. Also: Barbara Rossing, *The Rapture Exposed: The Message of Hope in the Book of Revelation* (Basic Books: New York, 2004) and Robert Jewett, *Jesus Against the Rapture: Seven Unexpected Prophecies*. (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1979).
- 9 See Shuck, *Marks of the Beast*, 38–39. Crawford Gribben, “John N. Darby, Dispensational Eschatology and the Formation of Trans-Atlantic Evangelism”, in *Schweizerische Zeitschrift für Religions- und Kulturgeschichte* 110 (2016): 99–109. He refers (104) to millennialism as a “distinctively American cultural phenomenon” and agrees that Darby, who popularized the rapture, became one of the most influential Protestant thinkers after John Wesley, Martin Luther and John Calvin (102). Symptomatic of these developments in the United States were millennial communities like the Jonestown group where 913 members of the Peoples Temple Agricultural Project died of poisoning in Guyana in 1978 under the leadership of Jim Jones, their charismatic leader and the Branch Davidians in Waco, Texas who awaited the end of the world. The tragic fate of these groups was widely reported in the media all over the globe, further intensifying the interest in millennial expectations. See on the latter, Pieter G.R. de Villiers, 2018, “The spirituality of apocalyptic and millenarian groups. The case of the Branch Davidians in Waco,” *HTS Theological Studies/Theological Studies* 74(3), a5152. <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v74i3.5152>. Also, Alissa Wilkinson, “The ‘Left Behind’ series was just the latest way America prepared for the Rapture,” *The Washington Post*, July 13, 2016.

films, video games and even bumper stickers for cars.<sup>10</sup> One sticker warned others that the driver of the may be missing because of the rapture that had taken place. These stickers, in turn, evoked ridicule and, in turn, generated a new set of stickers. There were, for example, stickers that stated: “Come the Rapture – Can I have your car?” or “Come the Rapture, the world will be ours again.”

The “Left Behind” books were preoccupied with millennialism and a rapture as an important turning point in world history when the born-again Christians who lived an exemplary life will unexpectedly be snatched away from earth to join Christ in the air. They claimed that 1 Thessalonians 4:17 provides the biblical foundation for this interpretation. After the rapture, the elect few will remain with Christ for a thousand years. Their reign of peace and bliss contrasts starkly with the fate of a large number of believers who are “left behind” and will only be saved if they persevere through the Antichrist’s war of seven years. Also striking is the way in which the fate of these remainers is integrated within particular historical events in the Middle East. The tribulations of the end will take place after Israel will be restored physically to the promised land and has made peace with other nations. The interpretation is further characterized by a conspiracy theory that during this time there will be a plot to establish a world empire of many nations in which people will wear the Mark of the Beast and use the same currency.<sup>11</sup> Finally, there will be another coming of Jesus after the thousand years.<sup>12</sup>

### 3. Darby and millennialism

The tantalising question is how it happened that a phenomenon like millennialism became such a dominant feature of the contemporary religious discourse after it functioned previously mostly on its periphery. The question is so important, given the extremely violent consequences of millennial groups and their lifestyle among certain groups. This was illustrated by the suicide of Jonestown church members and by the military

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10 See <https://www.cafepress.com/+rapture+bumper-stickers> for many examples.

11 See also Shuck, *Marks of the Beast*, 39 and 46–49.

12 The political implications of the rapture cannot be discussed within the limited space of this article. It will be investigated separately.

invasion of the Branch Davidians. Also worrying was asocial behaviour like the disruption of or damage to family life and ties, sexual abuse and financial exploitation that seemed to affect millennial groups.<sup>13</sup> Despite these negatives, millennialism thrived in the contemporary religious discourse.

There was no shortage of answers to why millennialism grew so strongly.<sup>14</sup> The impression was created that millennialism thrived on the gullibility and vulnerability of disadvantaged, unsophisticated groups on the fringes of society who experience times of trauma and oppression. Though there are some indications that millennialism may take hold in difficult times among some vulnerable people and that it is the result of indoctrination by abusive leaders, the situation is much more complex. There are enough reasons to question such a generalizing, stereotypical interpretation of millennial groups. The influence of a gifted individual, the role of a network of communities, the attention of mass media and some social conditions show that one cannot reduce this complex phenomenon to a simplistic cause. Of special relevance, though, is new evidence that show how millennialism in modern times feeds on a long, forgotten or neglected religious tradition that existed for centuries in modern England, as need to be analysed in this article now.

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- 13 See for this the two articles of De Villiers, cited above. The website, <https://jonestown.sdsu.edu/>, with the title “Alternative Considerations of Jonestown and Peoples Temple”, also provides insights into these observations. The website states that it aims to offer a balanced view of millennial movements like the Jonestown Peoples Church and to overcome the stereotypes that characterize popular responses to them. For the rest the site contains a treasure trove of information, not only for studies of the Jonestown group, but also for millennial movements generally. For other, different interpretations of millennial movements, see the discussion of the Jonestown massacre by Rebecca Moore, “Representations of Jonestown in the Arts,” [Online] [https://jonestown.sdsu.edu/?page\\_id=70205](https://jonestown.sdsu.edu/?page_id=70205) [Accessed: 28 November 2018].
- 14 Darren M. Slade, “Critical Book Review: For Zion’s Sake Christian Zionism and the Role of John Nelson Darby by Paul Richard Wilkinson,” [Online] [http://www.academia.edu/26338835/For\\_Zion\\_s\\_Sake\\_Christian\\_Zionism\\_and\\_the\\_Role\\_of\\_John\\_Nelson\\_Darby\\_-\\_by\\_Paul\\_Richard\\_Wilkinson](http://www.academia.edu/26338835/For_Zion_s_Sake_Christian_Zionism_and_the_Role_of_John_Nelson_Darby_-_by_Paul_Richard_Wilkinson) [Accessed: 28 November 2018]. It refers to the strong criticism of “Left Behind” literature by Hank Hanegraaff, *The Apocalypse Code: Find Out What the Bible Really Says About the End Times... and Why It Matters Today* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2007) and T. Boersma, *Is the Bible a Jigsaw Puzzle? An Evaluation of Hal Lindsey’s Writings* (Ontario: Paideia Press, 1978). Also, <http://www.bible.ca/rapture-origin-john-nelson-darby-1830ad.htm>



There is general agreement that contemporary teaching on the millennium and the rapture, was the result of the life and work of John Nelson Darby (1800–1882), a well-educated, erudite pastor in nineteenth century England.<sup>15</sup> There is no sign that he was part of a disadvantaged, marginal group. He was, to the contrary, born of a prominent, wealthy family who socialized within aristocratic circles. His privileged context allowed him an excellent education in law. A few years after he was admitted to the bar and practiced law, Darby, driven by intense religious convictions and interests, became a priest in the Church of Ireland. He was respected as a deeply committed, hard-working, pastor, working among the poor and spending long hours to visit his parish members on daily pastoral visits. And yet, remaining frustrated with his spiritual life within this context, he resigned from the church two years and three months later to join the Plymouth Brethren. A major concern to him was the influence of Roman Catholicism (popery, as he called it) on the church and state, the authoritarian behaviour of the church offices and the liturgy with its high church rituals. To his mind the church became too involved with the political authorities and the secular state. He regarded the authority of parliament and the crown in the appointment of clerics, the interference of the state in church matters and the requirement of the bishop that converts should swear allegiance to the king as indications that the church has become worldly.<sup>16</sup> The state has become evil in his eyes. Nothing was going to stop the corrupting nature and influence of the state on the church. For Darby the church has become corrupt and was in ruins like the seven churches in Revelation 2–3. Other

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15 Gribben, “Darby”, 103, noted, “Darby (1800-1882), one of the principal leaders of the new religious movement ... came from a wealthy family, with immediate connections to a trans-Atlantic social and commercial network that included such luminaries as Thomas Jefferson, Benjamin Franklin, George Washington, Adam Smith, and Joseph Priestly.” For his highly privileged status, see also Donald Harman Akenson, *Exporting the Rapture: John Nelson Darby and the Victorian Conquest of North-American Evangelicalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018).

16 See for example the extensive discussion in J.N. Darby, *The Church of England. The Church of God?* (London: W.H. Brown, s.a.). [Online] [https://www.brethrenarchive.org/media/360165/is\\_the\\_church\\_of\\_england\\_the\\_church\\_of\\_g.pdf](https://www.brethrenarchive.org/media/360165/is_the_church_of_england_the_church_of_g.pdf) [Accessed: 4 June 2019]. He begins the book with the statement, “In replying to the question, Why I left the Church of England? I replied, not that the world was in the Church of England, as you say – no such thing at all; but that I found the system I was mixed up with *to be the world, and not the Church of God at all*. That is a very distinct thing from worldly people in the Church” (3).

biblical texts were used to formulate his ecclesiology. He argues that the church shows no resemblance to the biblical portrait of the church. He notes, “Such is the history of the Church of England. To turn to Scripture, or its idea of a Church, no one thing the least like it can be traced in the New Testament, of Old either.”<sup>17</sup> According to him the time for a new church, as expected in Revelation, was near. It will come with the return of Christ and the rapture of the elect few to be with Christ.

The millennium teaching found its roots, therefore, to a large extent in the personal quest of Darby for spiritual fulfilment, his concern for a transformative faith, the decay of church and state, but also in his quest for biblical light on these matters. Also, formative was Darby’s evangelizing drive and, eventually, the role of mass media in communicating his convictions. Darby became known in international circles when he published a pamphlet in which he described his vision for the church in 1828 (*The Nature and Unity of the Church of Christ*) which was widely studied throughout the West.<sup>18</sup> Having established his reputation through this publication, he often travelled to places in Western Europe (Switzerland, France, Germany, Netherlands and others) and, later on, in the United States, where he visited seven times. He tirelessly undertook many journeys to promote his insights. On one of these he met Cyrus Scofield, a shadowy figure with a dubious career in the Confederate army. Whilst being jailed for forgery, Scofield experienced a dramatic repentance under the influence of Reverend James Brookes. Brookes had ties with a group of followers of Darby and through him Scofield learnt more about Darby. Later on, Scofield produced a reference bible which was published by Oxford University Press (revised in 1907). Known as the Scofield Reference Bible, it became widely popular, selling millions of copies.<sup>19</sup> Scofield, who accompanied Darby on

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17 Darby, *Church of God*, 6.

18 See John Nelson Darby. Father of Dispensationalism, *Christianity Today*. [Online] <https://www.christianitytoday.com/history/people/pastorsandpreachers/john-nelson-darby.html> [Accessed: 1 June 2019].

19 R. Todd Mangum and Mark S. Sweetnam, *The Scofield Bible: Its History and Impact on the Evangelical Church* (Colorado Springs: Paternoster, 2009), 169, writes, “Sales of *The Scofield Reference Bible* in the United States were simply staggering.” They ascribe the influence to his biblical commentary and to his discussion of current events. “Scofield’s apocalyptic predictions and assessments of the world’s plight matched uncannily well the situation in which readers of his Bible were living.” [Online] <https://books.google.co.za/books?id=oRKA1w6TPPcC&printsec=frontcover#v=onepage&q&f=false>

his mission journeys, incorporated Darby's teaching about the rapture in this publication. It helped popularize this teaching among the faithful. The widespread acceptance of this theory in the following decades is an early indication of the influence of this Bible, but also of the powerful role of the printed media and also prominent individuals in the contemporary religious discourse.<sup>20</sup>

There is still another reason why millennialism became so prominent. Millennial groups depend for their understanding of Scripture on leaders who claim prophetic insight in the hidden meaning of Scripture about future events. Such leaders would not easily acknowledge failures or mistakes. Where leadership changes or is challenged, dissension and fragmentation are at the order of the day. This often led to further fragmentation with the formation of new groups.<sup>21</sup> Darby who was not an easy person to work with, did not shy away from confrontation with and harsh treatment of those who differed from him. This was the case in his bitter dispute with Benjamin Wills Newton who had established the Plymouth Brethren with him.<sup>22</sup> In his lifetime the Plymouth Brethren split into the more Open Brethren and the stricter Closed Brethren.<sup>23</sup> Darby eventually broke away to form the

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- 20 See Shuck, *Marks of the Beast*, 36–37. He refers to Moody's crusades, several well-attended prophecy conferences of Drummond and the Scofield Bible that were crucial to the American reception of dispensationalism.
- 21 The Branch Davidians of Waco, Texas who broke away from the Adventist Church, provides a good insight in this fragmentation: their leadership changed over the years, and with those changes a new leader would offer new insights that were unacceptable to some, causing them to break away and form a new group. See for a description of their various leaders and the formation of groups that resulted from leadership changes, the discussion in De Villiers, "Branch Davidians."
- 22 See Jonathan D. Burnham, *A Story of Conflict: The Controversial Relationship between Benjamin Wills Newton and John Nelson Darby* (Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 2004). Also quoted by Doherty, "Brethren Cult Controversy", 28.
- 23 The history of the Brethren reveals bitter enmity and cruel exclusion of those who are regarded as dissenters. Othering those who differ is, therefore, a characteristic of these groups. For an insider view of such a group, its harsh, judgmental actions, the influence of its leaders, its exclusivist attitude and its commitment to separate themselves from society, see Janet Prost, "I survived the Exclusive Brethren", 31 August 2016. [Online] <http://www.stuff.co.nz/stuff-nation/assignments/have-you-left-a-cult-or-religious-sect-share-your-story/15776043/i-survived-the-Exclusive-Brethren> [Accessed: 4 June 2019]. Also Rosie Strode, "I was brought up in the exclusive brethren" [Online] <https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2007/jun/02/familyandrelationships.features> 2 June 2007. [Accessed: 4 June 2019]. Doherty, "Controversy", 42–43 provides an academic discussion of such examples, referring to literature, but also noticing the occasional false claims made by

Exclusive Brethren.<sup>24</sup> What is striking, though, is that this fragmentation and even bitterness among groups did not affect their commitment to Darby's insights. His insights remained immensely influential on Brethren groups, as is evident from the fundamental role that the "Darby Bible" plays among Brethren. This book remained a binding factor and continued to be read and quoted in later times.

#### 4. Darby and the rapture

Darby's literal reading of the Bible resonated with those who longed for a clear reading of Scripture and concrete guidance about future events. Following the narrative of Revelation 20:1–6, he argued that it teaches two resurrections: the resurrection of the saints "which is an entirely distinct thing from the resurrection of the wicked," which is also "definitely distinguished ... by a thousand years elapsing between the two."<sup>25</sup> The passage in Revelation 20:1–6 then states that the saints will return with Christ and execute judgment on the resurrected wicked ones at the end. Darby explained the rapture in a discussion of Revelation 12. The woman in this chapter, representing Israel, gives birth to a son, who is Christ. Revelation 12:5 refers to the "catching up" of the son, which Darby interprets as the rapture of the church. There is an intimate, corporate connection of the Son, who is Christ, with the church, so that the catching up of the son

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some. See also the discussion in Bernard Doherty, "The 'Brethren Cult Controversy': Dissecting a Contemporary Australian 'Social Problem'" in *Alternative Spirituality and Religion Review* 4 (2013): 25–48. He describes the various groups and notes, "This is an important point to emphasize as relations or agreement between various Exclusive Brethren on matters of doctrine or practice are frosty and fractured at best, and the PBCC in particular are often viewed with a great deal of suspicion by many other Brethren groups both 'Open' and 'Closed'."

- 24 See the short history in Christianity Today, 8 August 2008: "John Nelson Darby. Father of dispensationalism." [Online] <https://www.christianitytoday.com/history/people/.../john-nelson-darby.html> An extensive, sympathetic account of Darby is provided by Paul Wilkinson, *For Zion's Sake: Christian Zionism and the Role of John Nelson Darby*. (Colorado Springs, CO: Paternoster, 2007). For an overview of their history, see the article on "Exclusive Brethren", on the BBC's religions page. [Online] [http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/christianity/subdivisions/exclusivebrethren\\_1.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/christianity/subdivisions/exclusivebrethren_1.shtml) [Accessed: 4 June 2019]. For the fragmentation, see Massimo Introvigne, *The Plymouth Brethren* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 4–5, who identifies at least 10 groups of Brethren in the world.
- 25 J.N. Darby, *Lectures on the Second Coming*, (London: Broom, 1868), 86. [Online] <https://www.brethrenarchive.org/media/362120/darby-j-n-lectures-on-the-second-coming-delivered-in-canada.pdf>

is also the rapture of the church.<sup>26</sup> This verse illuminates the reference to a rapture in 1 Thessalonians 4:17. How literal this reading is, is evident when Darby sharply criticises amillennial readings. He writes, “Mark how the whole statement shows the perfect absurdity – and it is a sad a solemn thing, the influence which this delusion exercises on people’s minds – the perfect absurdity of what is called the spiritual millennium.” The verse, he emphasises, speaks of the saints accompanying Christ to judge the beast and false prophet. “And yet people are looking for the millennium as a state of the church down here!”<sup>27</sup>

An essential feature of contemporary millennialism was its dispensational nature. Darby uses the prominent number seven in Revelation, to portray a systematic unfolding of seven era’s or spheres in world history. He names them after biblical motifs as the eras of Paradise, Noah, Abraham, Israel, Gentiles, Spirit and the millennium / eternity. The last phase also unfolds neatly: the saints who are alive and the saints that were dead and have been resurrected, will meet Christ in the air. Then follows the tribulation of seven years in which the Antichrist will wage war in order to control the world. It is a time in which Israel will repent. Christ will then return for a second time, destroy the evil forces and judge unbelievers. Thereafter follows the millennium when Christ will rule over the world from Jerusalem. Satan is released at the end of the millennium and attacks unbelievers who reject Christ. Christ conquers the evil forces and the second resurrection takes place. The unbelievers are judged.<sup>28</sup>

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26 See the discussion of Darby’s exegesis in Michael J. Szigel, “‘What Child Is This?’ Darby’s Early Exegetical Argument for the Pretribulation Rapture of the Church,” *Trinity Journal* 35 (2014): 225–51. He also analyses the development of this teaching in Darby’s thought.

27 Darby, *Lectures*, 83.

28 J.N. Darby, *Lectures on the second coming of Christ*, 83. [Online] <https://www.brethrenarchive.org/media/362120/darby-j-n-lectures-on-the-second-coming-delivered-in-canada.pdf>, 108. Also new was the role of the Jews in the end time: the kingdom of the Jews will be replaced by a Christian kingdom. The pattern of thought behind this is the Jewish expectation of a millennium. The Messiah will return to earth to reign for a thousand years as the king of the Jews, who had once rejected him as their ruler but who would now accept him. Within Darby’s conception believers will inherit the blessings promised to Jews with the rapture. He does accord to the Jews some role in the end time, but then only as those who will believe in Christ when they experience his second coming.

## 5. The roots of contemporary millennialism

A much-repeated criticism of the rapture teaching is that it is the product of Darby's fertile imagination. In John H. Whitehead, "OldSpeak. God So Loved the World that He Gave Us World War III: An Interview with Barbara Rossing," Rossing responded as follows to a question: "Prior to Darby, there was no one teaching a line between the so-called rapture and the so-called 7-year period of tribulation, with a second coming of Christ. This was all new, and it began in the 1830s."<sup>29</sup> Such an argument serves to characterize his teaching as an aberration, without any support in the Christian discourse.

Recent research has provided more information about previously neglected, ignored or unknown texts that illuminate the origins of millenarian thinking and the rapture. This information is important because it helps explain why the millennial teaching was so important. These texts were written in England as part of a millennialist trajectory that became prominent from the seventeenth century onwards. This trajectory reflects millennial and especially dispensationalist perspectives that existed from Early Christianity to modern times. It illustrates that millennial thinking was more important than is normally thought. There are clear precedents in previous times, despite strong attempts to discredit and eliminate it. Millennialism was, in the words of Hotson, "an error almost universally condemned within the established Protestant churches."<sup>30</sup> Strong

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29 [Online] [https://www.rutherford.org/publications\\_resources/oldspeak/god\\_so\\_loved\\_the\\_world\\_that\\_he\\_gave\\_us\\_world\\_war\\_iii](https://www.rutherford.org/publications_resources/oldspeak/god_so_loved_the_world_that_he_gave_us_world_war_iii) [Accessed: 27 November 2018]. See also the discussion in chapter 2 in Rossing, *Rapture* and "The Origin of the Rapture False Doctrine: John Darby." [Online] <http://www.bible.ca/rapture-origin-john-nelson-darby-1830ad.htm> It states categorically, "The fact that John Nelson Darby invented the pre-tribulation rapture doctrine around 1830 AD is unquestionably true with a single exception: Morgan Edwards wrote a short essay as a college paper for Bristol Baptist College in Bristol England in 1744 where he confused the second coming with the first resurrection of Revelation 20 and described a 'pre-tribulation' rapture. However, Edward's ideas, which he admitted were brand new and never before taught, had no influence in the modern population of the false doctrine. That prize goes to Darby." Some argue that Darby took it over from a Scottish girl, Margaret Macdonald, who, in 1830, experienced a vision in a healing service which, she claimed, revealed the teaching to her. See Dave MacPherson, *The Incredible Cover-Up* (Medford: Omega, 1991) and the criticism of Paul Wilkinson, *For Zion's Sake: Christian Zionism and the Role of John Nelson Darby* (Colorado Springs, CO: Paternoster, 2007).

30 Howard Hotson, *Paradise Postponed. Johann Heinrich and the Birth of Calvinist Millenarianism* (Dordrecht: Springer-Science+Bursiness Media, 2013), ix. Hotson,

prejudices against this trajectory contributed to a historiography of the religious discourse in England that was practically blind for the work of millennialist authors.<sup>31</sup>

### 5.1. Mede, the Father of British Millenarianism

A specific example of such neglect is the neglected or unknown work of Joseph Mede (1585–1638), a professor in Greek at Christ’s College in Cambridge. Recent scholarship has underlined that he was a prominent and influential English theologian and clergyman during his lifetime.<sup>32</sup> Much of what Mede wrote, overlaps with the millennialist contents of Darby’s teaching, revealing how similar expectations were prominent long before Darby’s time and how it permeated the religious discourse of England since the seventeenth century. In a recent extensive discussion of dispensationalism in seventeenth- and eighteenth century English apocalypticism, William Watson described Mede as the person who was responsible for the rebirth of British millennialism in the seventeenth century onwards. He noted his influence on his times and on later millennial movements and dispensational thought.<sup>33</sup> It was, furthermore, a millennialism with extensive social and political consequences.

By the time Darby wrote his ideas down, millennialism was, therefore, already an established feature of the religious discourse in England. It is an illusion to think that the established churches succeeded in eliminating millennial thinking. Millennialism was, as an analysis of Mede’s

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Paradise, 3, notes, for example, the condemnation of the Lutherans in the Augsburg Confession (1530), the English in the 42 Articles of Religion (1552) and the Reformed in the Second Helvetic Confession (1566).

31 See Watson, *Dispensationalism*, 177.

32 Jeffrey K. Jue, *Heaven Upon Earth. Joseph Mede (1586–1638) and the Legacy of Millenarianism*. (Dordrecht: Springer, 2006), 21, for a biography. He describes Mede as the “patriarch” of millennialism in Britain. See William C. Watson, *Dispensationalism before Darby: Seventeenth-Century and Eighteenth-Century English Apocalypticism* (Silverton: Lampion Press, 2015). See also Jue, Heaven, 21. [Online] <https://books.google.co.za/books?id=jGcgAWAAQBAJ&printsec=frontcover#v=onepage&q&f=false>

33 Jeffrey K. Jue, “Puritan Millenarianism in Old and New England,” in: John Coffey, Paul C.G. Lim (eds.). *The Cambridge Companion to Puritanism*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008). Jue mentions other millenarians from this time like Piscator (teacher of Alsted) and Thomas Brightman. His essay contains many examples of the strong, extensive influence of Mede on subsequent times and people. See also the views of Hotson, *Paradise*.

writings will show, alive and well, always at work within many groups. What happened in “Left Behind” thinking in the late twentieth century, therefore, was not merely a result of Darby’s work, but reflects a strong millennialist mindset that permeated the religious discourse in England over a long period of time long before his time and was transplanted to the United States through various groups and faith communities. One could say that the popularity of British millennialism reflects a movement with long established convictions that would eventually also influence groups in the United States. Darby’s own reception of the rapture would not have been possible without the existence of this much larger movement.

The millennial movement was, furthermore, so influential, because of claims that it is rooted in the biblical message about the future. It addresses seminal issues that intrigued faith communities and that related to key issues about their own fate and their experiences of contemporary life. This is clear from the fact that Mede, like Darby, was also a careful reader of Revelation. He was highly regarded by many in his times as its authoritative interpreter. Mede’s best-known publication in this regard was his *Clavis Apocalyptica* (the Key of Revelation), which appeared in several versions until it became a commentary on the whole of Revelation by the time it was published in a revised edition in 1632.<sup>34</sup> He speculated that the world would end by 1716. He was convinced that Jews would be converted before the second coming.<sup>35</sup> His careful exegesis, knowledge of Greek, his use of sources from Antiquity, including Jewish and patristic texts, lent a special, learned character to his views and made an impression as a solid, biblically

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34 R. Bransby Cooper, *A Translation of Mede’s, Clavis Apocalyptica* (London: J.G. & F. Rivington, 1833). This translation reveals Mede’s “synchronic” approach to Revelation: he shows how different characters and events in different parts of the book refer have the same referent and “synchronize with each other (7). They reflect “contemporaneous” matters. As an example, he argues that the saints who carry the name of the Lamb on their forehead, “are universally and exactly contemporary with the beast” (14). Mede thus illustrates how the author of Revelation portrays eschatological events in terms of opposites (23–24): they relate to the same matter but illustrate it from two different perspectives.

35 Shuck, *Marks of the Beast*, 33–34, notes the opposition to date-setting among dispensationalists, referring to Miller’s embarrassing failed prophecies of 1843 and 1844.



based doctrine.<sup>36</sup> As a result many regarded him as the expert on the book and consulted him about its meaning.<sup>37</sup> His work was widely read all over Europe, including countries like England, Ireland, Netherlands and France. Jue noted that it was the intellectual nature of Mede's millennialism that impressed not only his own colleagues, but also international scholars.

How widespread this movement was, is evident from the life and work of other people in various places and countries. This included the Italian Joachimists of the third quarter of the sixteenth century. Authors like Sebastian Castellione, Coelio Secundo Curione, Alfonso Corrado and Jacopo Brocardo were all millennialists. Some were influential figures, like, for example, Johannes Piscator who published a millennialist commentary on Revelation in 1613 and Johann Amos Comenius (1592–1670) who expected the millennium to begin in 1672.

Especially noteworthy for Darby's teaching, as well as for the work of Mede and the context in England, was the German scholar, Johann Heinrich Alsted, whose work was widely read in Europe and the United States. In the United Kingdom Mede acknowledged the influence of Alsted's millennialism on his thought.<sup>38</sup> Alsted (1588–1638) was, interestingly enough, a well-known orthodox Calvinist, who developed his teaching of the millennium in terms of a close reading of Revelation 20. He published it in a publication with the title, *Diatrise de mille annis apocalypticis*. This work, though sober in its description of end events, represented a breakthrough in his tradition and would resonate widely with authors from the same tradition in England. Hotson describes this book as “the first work by a mainstream Protestant theologian exclusively dedicated to defending

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36 Arthur W. Wainwright, *Mysterious Apocalypse: Interpreting the Book of Revelation* (Wipf and Stock: Eugene, OR., 2001), 69, notes, “The effect of Mede's interpretation was far-reaching in England. He kept away from the arena of political controversy, but his work gave intellectual respectability to millenarian speculation in the world of politics.”

37 Jue, *Heaven*, 15, describes the extent of this international correspondence between him and others from the continent.

38 Jue, *Heaven*, 15 analyses how networks were established beyond England across Europe and North America to interact with other scholars about matters of academic interest. This state of affairs shows how religious groups with similar interests interacted beyond the borders of their own countries already in the first half of the seventeenth century.

the doctrine of a future millennium.”<sup>39</sup> Already in the seventeenth century, then, the fundamentals of millennialism were alive and well in England.

In this short, but carefully formulated work with its calculations of numbers, Alsted went so far as to determine 1694 as the moment that the end of the world will take place.<sup>40</sup> He reached this conclusion by analysing Revelation as a book that provides information about the phases of world history. Each of the septets in Revelation represent a phase in this unfolding history. The septet of seals (Rev 6) recounts the history of the church until 606, the septet of trumpets the phase until 1517 and the septet of bowls the time until 1694. Alsted expected the millennium to begin after the fall of the pope in Rome and Roman Catholicism. The millennium, he further noted, would comprise the resurrection of the saints and the conversion of the Jews.<sup>41</sup> One recognizes in this system features of the dispensational mindset that would influence Darby and the “Left Behind” literature.

Influenced by and following in many ways Alsted’s predictions of the end, Mede also offered a dispensational reading of Revelation. He calculated numbers and symbols in Revelation to produce a chronology of events. For him world history unfolds in seven phases, four of which were still to take place. Of particular importance, though, is his description of the last two phases, which is also relevant for rapture teachings of later times. Within hundred years, he postulated, Christ will return to wage war against the Antichrist, to resurrect the saints and to be together with them for a thousand years. The kingdom represents an intermediate state of a thousand years before the end will come. A seminal characteristic of Mede’s eschatology is that the dead will be raised physically at the beginning of the millennium. The millennium will be complete with the judgment of

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39 Hotson, *Paradise Postponed*, ix.

40 See Wainwright, *Apocalypse*, 68. Also Robert G. Clouse, “Johann Heinrich Alsted and English Millennialism,” *Harvard Theological Review* 62 (1969), 189–207. Alsted’s influence on English theologians is confirmed by the criticism of Hayne and Baillie, two church leaders who found it necessary to oppose his speculations about the end as dangerous, as Clouse points out (199–200). See also Howard Hotson, *Johann Heinrich Alsted 1588–1638: Between Renaissance, Reformation, and Universal Reform* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000) who describes him as a pioneer of Calvinist millenarianism. Alsted was a delegate to the famous synod of Dordt that is known for its orthodox decisions.

41 Wainwright, *Apocalypse*, 68.

the dead.<sup>42</sup> He refers to a “first partial, and as it may be termed, morning judgment of the Antichrist, and of the other living enemies of the Church, by the glorious appearance of our Lord in a flame of fire, and finishing at length after the reign of a thousand years, granted to the new Jerusalem, his most holy spouse on this earth, and the total destruction of new enemies hereafter to arise when the great day is declining, and Satan again loosed, by the universal resurrection and judgment of all the dead.”

Though his text is also as sober and unsensational<sup>43</sup> as that of Alsted, he does not refrain from applying the text directly to his own times, identifying, like Alsted and many other millennialist authors of his time, Roman Catholicism as the demonic enemy of the saints and the pope as Antichrist.<sup>44</sup> Other key motifs in millennial thought are present in his commentary. He also mentions the possibility of a rapture before the tribulation<sup>45</sup> and allocates an important role to the Jews in the end events. He stated, namely, that the last two phases would end with the return of Jews to Israel and the final judgement of the wicked.<sup>46</sup> The last phase with the destruction of the wicked will happen only when Christ intervenes by resurrecting martyrs and establishing a reign of a thousand years. He thus

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42 Wainwright, *Apocalypse*, 68.

43 Mede, aware that his millennial reading deviates from the established position, goes out of his way to defend his views. He writes, “In so great a mystery, it will be sufficient to maintain the thing in a general manner, and not to inquire too curiously into the reasons of each particular part.” See Cooper, *Clavis*, 433 where the English translation of his Latin text is found.

44 Mede writes extensively about the role of Roman Catholicism in England. See, for example, his long discussion of the bowls which he often interprets as referring to the judgment of the Roman Catholic Church, in Cooper, *Clavis*, 419ff. Rome is the “apocalyptic Babylon” and “the pope was the Antichrist” (419–420). Wainwright, *Apocalypse*, 69, notes how Mede calculated the time between 1625 and 1715 for the coming of the millennium. He used the number 1260 in Revelation 11:2–3; 12:6, 14; 13:5) to count from three possible starting points: the 365 (the death of emperor Julian), 410 (the fall of Rome) and 455 (the death of emperor Valentinian).

45 Wainwright, *Apocalypse*, 83, notes that Mede mentions it, but did not commit himself to the doctrine. He adds, “In the nineteenth century, William Cunningham accepted the doctrine, and it was put forward at the Albury Park Conferences (1826–30) in which Henry Drummond and Edward Irving participated.”

46 Mede interprets the sixth bowl as referring to the arrival of new enemies of the beast who are “the Israelites, wonderfully converted to the pure faith and worship of Christ, and now become candidates for the kingdom promised for so many ages.” See Cooper, *Clavis*, 427–28.

distinguishes a millennial dispensation from other eschatological events, similar to what Darby did more extensively some decades later.

## 5.2. Other roots of millennialism

The dispensationalist aspects of Mede’s millennialism are, for example, not entirely unique. Boyer showed how the notions of dispensationalism and pre-millennialism that contributed to Darby’s insights, can be traced in some general way to dispensationalist schemes by authors like Joachim of Fiore or to Protestant Evangelicals.<sup>47</sup> Other authors also refer to similar thoughts in various texts from modern times. Benware noted, “As early as 1687, Peter Jurieu, in his book *Approaching Deliverance of the Church* (1687), taught that Christ would come in the air to rapture the saints and return to heaven before the battle of Armageddon. He spoke of a secret rapture prior to His coming in glory and judgment at Armageddon.”<sup>48</sup> More specifically, though, Benware points to remarks of early authors that implied some basic form of rapture of the saints to heaven as an imminent event that would take place separately from the Second Coming and that would provide a place of security and peace to them in the last days. These remarks were made by writers like Jurieu (1687), Doddridge (1738) Gill (1748), Macknight (1763), Scott (1792). In the United States, clergy who distinguished, but, more importantly and relevant for this discussion, is how rapture doctrine can be found in the writings of early interpreters like, for example, the Puritan preachers *Cotton and Increase Mather*. Also, of specific relevance is a reference by Ice to Edwards, a pastor from Wales who settled in the United States in 1761 in Philadelphia and who expected a rapture on the basis of Daniel’s 70<sup>th</sup> week, happening 3 1/2 years before the Parousia.<sup>49</sup>

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47 Paul Boyer, *When Time Shall Be No More: Prophecy Belief in Modern American Culture* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994), 88. For another discussion of dispensationalism, see Alan P.F. Sell, *Confessing the Faith. Yesterday and Today. Essays Reformed, Dissenting and Catholic*. (Cambridge: James Clarke, 2013), 235ff. who traces millennialist authors from antiquity ((Justin Martyr, Tertullian, Origin, Augustine etc. to modernity). Also: Slade, “Critical Review”, quoted above. Kovacs and Rowland, *Revelation*, 200–214, offers a valuable oversight of millennium readings since antiquity

48 Paul N. Benware, *Understanding End Times Prophecy: A Comprehensive Approach* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1995).

49 Tommy Ice, “Morgan Edwards: A Pre-Darby Rapturist,” *The Conservative Theological Journal*, April 1997, 4–12.

Mede, Alsted and a large number of authors all held on to a premillennial eschatology in a time that the amillennial position was the established view of mainstream scholars and churches in England. One could argue that the bitter hostilities, including the Thirty Years War (1618–1648), mainly between Roman Catholics and Protestants, were the reason for the growth of this teaching. Alsted developed his reading of Revelation within the context of this war with the pastoral intent to comfort believers who experienced its devastation caused by during his lifetime. Mede's work on Revelation was also written in a similar difficult context with strong tensions, hostility and divisions between groups in society and church that generated much anxiety. It was a time of deep pessimism. The Church of England "would be torn apart by embittered factions insisting on more thorough reforms, while Parliament itself would repudiate the divine right of the monarch plunging the nation into civil war."<sup>50</sup> And yet – even though the turbulent times in which he lived and studied influenced the way he conceptualized his millennialism, it was the study of Revelation which was the most formative factor. Religious needs, the desire and even anxiety to know more about the future pronouncements in the Bible, but also the seminal place of eschatology in Christianity were more important factors that played a role in the growth of millennialism. In total, though, these authors show the existence and vibrant nature of millennialism in Darby's times and contexts, long before he actually conceptualised his version of it.

Recently Akenson provided new and intriguing insights in the life and work of Darby within the context of the religious context of England and Ireland, but also in the wider context of the continental religious discourse. He notes how authors, "embraced a congeries of ideas that in, say, 1800 was alien to the overwhelming majority of Protestant clerics and theologians in western Europe: an extremely literalistic reading of big swaths of the Bible that orthodox churches read allegorically; a belief that Jesus would physically appear on earth; an interpretation of biblical prophecy that affirmed it to be, when read properly, a precise map of how the world would run from Jesus's return onward into a deep eternity." Akenson describes the expectation of a secret rapture as "a truly brilliant invention, easily

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50 Jue, *Heaven*, 19; also 31. [Online] <https://books.google.co.za/books?id=p3lSegPdi1sC&printsec=frontcover#v=onepage&q&f=false>

the most creative part of the radical evangelical program as it issued forth from Ireland,” but then adds, “whether it was created by Darby or in fair degree borrowed from elsewhere is not a matter on which there is probative evidence.”<sup>51</sup> In other words, there is no convincing evidence to determine the origins of the rapture teaching.

## 6. Conclusion

This discussion shows that there did exist pronouncements of authors in early modern England with motifs that were similar to Darby’s rapture teaching. These readings played a seminal role and often had far reaching consequences for the situation of the church, state and society. It should be remembered that millennialism was a prominent phenomenon in the British Empire as a colonial power that dominated large parts of the globe. It would ultimately make its presence felt all over the Empire, as those who represented the empire took their religious convictions with them wherever they would travel. It remains intriguing to see how millennialism took root in colonial outposts through the religious activities of church folk.<sup>52</sup>

Mede strongly influenced the subsequent religious, ecclesiastical and political history of England.<sup>53</sup> He participated in a long tradition of millennialism that would eventually form the foundation on which Darby would build his rapture teaching. Clearly, then, Darby’s rapture is not as entirely new as is suggested by his critics. He did, as is to be expected when an individual appropriates biblical texts, systematise and develop the teaching in a particular way. Darby developed his reception of a trajectory that was popular among laypeople, marginal groups, but also among academics, intellectuals and church leaders.

This trajectory certainly drew criticism. By times it was so strong that millennialism was relegated to the margins of the religious discourse.<sup>54</sup> This criticism ranges from the obvious derision of failed predictions to

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51 See the first chapter in Akenson, “Rapture for this quotation and for a full description.”

52 The prominence of millennialism among some of the most influential church leaders in South Africa requires a separate investigation. I hope to address that issue in another article.

53 See the publications of Jue, who describes the political consequences of his writings.

54 Kovacs and Rowland, *Revelation*, 200–214. discusses some of the critics and their criticism.

warnings about negative consequences, especially when it elicited asocial behaviour, violent uprisings against the state and personal suffering of individuals.

Especially crucial is the discussion about an ethical reading of the Bible. A binary reading of the bible that lives off an agonistic distinction between saints and evildoers, between good and evil, may promote exclusivism and othering of people who do not share one's position. Inherent in the millennialist pessimism about the earth and the present dispensation lurks a Gnosticism that devalues the existing world and creation. Too easily such a view may lead people to ignore or neglect serious challenges that endangers human existence. The expectation of an imminent judgment and destruction of the world could bring millennialists to argue that matters like climate change and pollution need not be addressed. Millennialism may encourage dangerous political actions, like war in the Middle East, because such a war is a sign of the approaching end.

These considerations draw attention to the fundamental challenge that has to do with the way that the Bible is being read. Literal, eclectic readings too easily ignore the contexts in which the eschatological pronouncements belong. The pronouncement in 1 Thessalonians 4:17 about the rapture into the air was, for example, made by Paul about what was imminent for his own time. There is no indication in the text or in Paul's other letters that such an event was predicted for later times. There is also no indication in Revelation that 20:1–6 should be read in conjunction with 1 Thessalonians 4. An ethical reading of the Bible requires that one should read it in a responsible way to acknowledge and respect the integrity of biblical texts. In this way the text will not be abused to reflect one's own prejudices and hidden agendas.

Finally, one should also contrast rapture thinking with the strong tradition that reads Revelation as a prophetic book. From earliest times there were many readers who understood that the book was a prophecy that wanted to illuminate the spiritual challenges that face faith communities in their spiritual journey and that desired to reflect on the will of God for communities in times of instability.<sup>55</sup> Such authors rejected readings that linked the book with predictions about the future or that create

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55 See De Villiers, "Reading Revelation Politically," cited above.

the impression that it reveals the fortunes of a privileged few. Especially influential in developing an alternative reading of Revelation were the early church fathers, Clement and Origen, who called for readers to link their literal reading of the book with a quest for its spiritual meaning. Such a reading reflects the heart of the early Christian discourse which interpreted the book consistently as joyful proclamation of God's compassion for the faithful in their challenging times.

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