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ALLEGED IRVINGITE INFLUENCE ON DARBY AND THE RAPTURE

Tom's Perspectives

by Thomas Ice

Since the 1970s in America, it has become commonplace for writers of articles and books against pretribulationism to bring up some form of the argument that Darby got key elements of his view from an Irvingite source. More recently a scholarly attempt is made by American Mark Patterson¹ to see Irvingite eschatology as an antecedent source to Darby and pretribulationism. "Irving's writing in *The Morning Watch* reveal that he was, above and before anything else, a pretribulation-premillennial theologian," declares Patterson. "This cannot be overstated. From his meeting with Hately Frere in 1825 until his death in December 1834, Irving's every thought and writing was shaped under the aegis of his imminent Adventism and premillennial convictions."² Even though Patterson says:

It is not my purpose here to correlate or equate Albury's premillennialism with contemporary dispensationalism or to prove the source of the latter is to be found in the former. My intention is simply to demonstrate that Albury's hermeneutic led to a specific systematic theology that I believe is best described as "nascent dispensationalism." The precise relationship between Albury's theology and that which will follow in John Nelson Darby, the Plymouth Brethren, and especially 20th century dispensationalism, while remarkable, lie beyond the purview of this thesis.³

Patterson says in a co-authored article, "In the end, and at the very least, Irving must be considered the paladin of pre-tribulation pre-millennialism and the chief architect of its cardinal formulas."⁴

IRVINGITE INFLUENCES?

As noted above, Patterson claims that Edward Irving is the true father of pretribulationism.

In addition to the *a priori* dismissal of Irving, there exist two fundamental errors common among those who uncritically assume Darby to be the source of the pre-tribulation Rapture. First, few acknowledge the degree to which Darby's theology reflects the very millenarian tradition in which he was immersed. The core principles of his theology—literalistic hermeneutic, apostasy in the Church, the restoration of the Jews to their homeland, details of Christ's coming, and his belief that biblical prophecy spoke uniquely to his day—were concepts held, discussed and propagated by a large body of prophecy students. Second, the development of Darby's own theology, in spite of how he remembers it, was from 1827 to even as late as 1843 in a largely formative stage.⁵

There are a number of problems created when one sees too great of a similarity between Irvingite historicism and Brethren futurism. Patterson makes such errors.

The "core principles" of Darby's theology, as expressed by Patterson are too broad and general. Look at this list compared to Irving and his followers: First, "literalistic hermeneutic." Patterson himself describes Irving and the Albury hermeneutics as not

just literal since that “tells only half the story,” but ones who follow the “literal-typological methodology.”⁶ This is typical of the quasi-literalism of historicism. While Darby is said to be a consistent literalist, who did not attempt to make days into years or find historical fulfillment of seal, trumpet or bowl judgments in the church’s past history. These events were all literal and future events. Also, Irving believed that many of the passages that spoke of events in a Jewish tribulation were unfolding before their eyes. For example, Babylon refers to the apostate Church of their own day. David Bebbington distinguishes between historicist hermeneutic and a futurist form of literalism:

Historicists found it hard to be thoroughgoing advocates of literal interpretation. There was too great a gulf between the detail of biblical images and their alleged historical fulfillment to make any such claim possible. Futurists did not suffer from this handicap. Consequently, they shouted louder for literalism—and, among the futurists, the dispensationalists shouted loudest of all. J. N. Darby was contending as early as 1829 that prophecy relating to the Jews would be fulfilled literally. As his thought developed during the 1830s, this principle of interpretation became the lynchpin of his system. Because Darby’s opinions were most wedded to literalism, his distinctive scheme enjoyed the advantage of taking what seemed the most rigorist view of scripture.⁷

Thus, Irving and Albury do not have a common hermeneutic with Darby as Patterson contends.

Both groups held to the apostasy of the church, but even this similarity reflects a great chasm of differences between the historicist and futurist views. The Albury view held that the church had just finished the 1260 days, which are really 1260 years that ended with the defeat of Antichrist (Roman Catholicism) in 1789 via the French Revolution. These events forewarned the soon rise of the whore of Babylon (Rev. 17—18), which is the apostate church.⁸ On the other hand, Darby’s futurism held that apostasy was predicted primarily in the New Testament Epistles and would increasingly characterize the end of the current church age. Albury historicism saw apostasy as a harbinger of the second coming of Christ to the earth. Darby saw the ruin of the church as a characteristic that precedes an imminent rapture of the church followed by the events of the seven-year tribulation.

Both approaches do see a restoration of the Jews to their homeland, but as with the previous two issues, there are significant differences. Darby believed that the Jews would return to their land in unbelief and then converted during the seven-year tribulation, yet future to the church age. He says, “At the end of the age the same fact will be reproduced: the Jews—returned to their own land, though without being converted—will find themselves in connection with the fourth beast.”⁹ However, Irving believed that current with this present age, “when the Lord shall have finished the taking of witness against the Gentiles, . . . will turn his Holy Spirit unto his ancient people the Jews.”¹⁰ Shortly after that time, Christ will return.¹¹

The last two items mentioned by Patterson are “details of Christ’s coming, and his belief that biblical prophecy spoke uniquely to his day.” These are so broad that they could be said to characterize just about any Evangelical view of eschatology, whether amillennial, premillennial or postmillennial; whether preterist, historicist, futurist or idealist. Every approach has details of Christ’s coming and certainly every system

believes that their view speaks uniquely to his day. More importantly are the differences concerning the details of Christ coming as seen by the different systems and also many difference would arise in relation to how each prophetic view spoke uniquely to his day. Thus, it is less than compelling to see how Irving and Albury's eschatology is the forerunner to Darby, pretribulationism and dispensationalism. Instead, it is Irving and Albury that Darby was reacting against.

IRVINGITE HISTORICISM

An extensive critical analysis of Irvingite doctrine declared that they were still overwhelmingly historicist, while Darby and the Brethren had become futurist. Flegg, an Irvingite scholar who grew up within the church, notes that the differences between the two movements are far-reaching:

The Brethren took a futurist view of the Apocalypse, attacking particularly the interpretation of prophetic 'days' as 'years', so important for all historicists, including the Catholic Apostolics. . . . It was the adoption of this futurist eschatology by a *body* of Christians which gave it the strength to become a serious rival to the alternative historicist eschatology of the Catholic Apostolics and others. Darby introduced the concept of a *secret* rapture to take place 'at any moment', a belief which subsequently became one of the chief hallmarks of Brethren eschatology. He also taught that the 'true' Church was invisible and spiritual. Both these ideas were in sharp contrast to Catholic Apostolic teaching, . . . There were thus very significant differences between the two eschatologies, and attempts to see any direct influence of one upon the other seem unlikely to succeed—they had a number of common *roots*, but are much more notable for their points of disagreement.¹²

Irving taught that the second coming was synonymous with the rapture.¹³ He believed that it was the single return of the Lord that was getting near.

CONCLUSION

While Irving and the Albury group had a few eschatological ideas that were unique, a belief in the pretrib rapture was not one of those aspects. It is impossible for one to follow the historicist approach and also believe that the rapture will occur before the tribulation, since historicists believe that the tribulation began hundreds of years ago. It is also true that Irvingites spoke of a soon coming of Christ to translate believers to heaven, but this view was part of their second coming belief that they apparently derived from Manuel Lacunza's writings,¹ which were not the product of futurism at that point. On the other hand, Darby most likely thought of and then developed the idea of pretribulationism in the process of shifting to futurism. Maranatha!

ENDNOTES

¹ Manuel Lacunza, also known as Juan Josafat Ben-Ezra, *The Coming of Messiah*, pp. 99–101; 214–17; 248–51; 266–67.

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- ¹ Mark Rayburn Patterson, "Designing the Last Days: Edward Irving, The Albury Circle, and the Theology of The Morning Watch," Ph. D. Thesis, King's College, London, January 2001.
- ² Patterson, "Designing," pp. 228–29.
- ³ Patterson, "Designing," p. 136.
- ⁴ Mark A. Patterson and Andrew Walker, "'Our Unspeakable Comfort': Irving, Albury, and the Origins of the Pre-Tribulation Rapture, in Stephen Hunt, editor, *Christian Millenarianism: From the Early Church to Waco*, (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2001), p. 115.
- ⁵ Patterson and Walker, "'Our Unspeakable Comfort,'" pp. 114–15.
- ⁶ Patterson, "Designing," p. 76. See also, p. 62.
- ⁷ David Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain: A History from the 1730s to the 1980s* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1989), p. 89.
- ⁸ See Edward Irving, "Preliminary Discourse by the Translator" in Juan Josafat Ben-Ezra, *The Coming of Messiah in Glory and Majesty* (London: L. B. Seeley and son, 1827), p. xxxiii.
- ⁹ John Nelson Darby, *The Hopes of the Church of God, in Connection with the Destiny of the Jews and the Nations as Revealed in Prophecy* (1840), *Collected Writings*, vol. 2 (Winschoten, Netherlands: H. L. Heijkoop, reprint 1971), 324.
- ¹⁰ Irving, "Preliminary Discourse," p. v.
- ¹¹ Irving, "Preliminary Discourse," p. vi.
- ¹² (emphasis original) Columba Graham Flegg, *'Gathered Under Apostles' A Study of the Catholic Apostolic Church* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), p. 436. Flegg's chapter on Catholic Apostolic eschatology is extensive, (249 pages), more than half the volume of the book.
- ¹³ Edward Irving, "Signs of the Times in the Church," *The Morning Watch*, Vol. 2 (1830), p. 156.