

EDWARD IRVING AND THE RAPTURE

Tom's Perspectives
by Thomas Ice

Did key elements of the doctrine of the pretribulational rapture originate with either Edward Irving (1792–1834) or the broader Irvingite movement and then conveyed to John Nelson Darby (1800–1882) and the Brethren? This is the general thesis put forth in dozens of books and articles for many years. However, I do not believe that there is merit to such a position since Irving and his movement never taught pretribulationism and both come from very different eschatological systems.

CLAIMS

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. 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 pretribulational-premillennial theologian," declares Patterson. "This cannot be overstated. From his meeting with Hatley 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 Patterson says in a co-authored article, "In the end, and at the very least, Irving must be considered the paladin of pre-tribulational pre-millennialism and the chief architect of its cardinal formulas."³ He adds the following:

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.⁴

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

PROBLEMS

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."⁵ 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, as the text said and describe future events. Also, Irving believed that many of the passages that spoke of events in a future Jewish tribulation were unfolding before their eyes, for example, Babylon referred to the apostate Church of their own day. David Bebbington distinguishes between historicist hermeneutics 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.⁶

Thus, Irving does not have a common hermeneutic with Darby as Patterson contends.

No doubt both held to the apostasy of the church, but even this similarity reflects a great chasm of differences between the Albury historicist view and that of the futurist. The Albury view of apostasy was because the church had just finished the 1260 days, which are really 1260 years that ended with the defeat of Antichrist (i.e., 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.⁷ On the other hand, Darby and his futurism held that the apostasy of the church was predicted primarily in the New Testament Epistles and would increasingly characterize the end of the current church age, which is totally different than what will take place after the rapture during the tribulation. Irving's historicism saw apostasy as a harbinger of the second coming of Christ to the earth, while 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 and then the second coming.

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."⁸ 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."⁹ Shortly after that time, Christ will return.¹⁰

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's eschatology is the forerunner to Darby, pretribulationism and dispensationalism. Instead, it is Irving's eschatology that Darby was reacting against.

Concerning Patterson's second point, I agree that it was a process of about fifteen years in which Darby developed a mature system, however, the initial idea of something like a pre-trib rapture would come in an instant, even though it might take a decade and a half to work out the implications and settle one's conscience. Just such a scenario appears to fit what we know of Darby. Further, I don't think anyone who has studied these issues would argue that Darby was incapable of producing a unique theology.

THE IRVINGITE VIEW OF THE RAPTURE

Even though Irving and his disciples spoke often about the translation of saints to heaven, they clearly did not hold to pre-trib rapture views. No one reacted in opposition to their views for being new as they did when Darby's views were made know. Flegg's definitive and fairly recent work on the Catholic Apostolic Church (Irving's church) makes it clear "that the translation may not be simply a single event at the time of the first resurrection, but spread over a short period of time prior to it."¹¹ Doesn't this sound like pretribulationism? Flegg further explains what is meant:

This period of great tribulation was inevitable, but would be escaped by an elect body (those referred to by St. Paul in I Thess. 4:16–17) who would be resurrected by Christ or translated (caught up in the clouds) through the operation of the Holy Spirit at the beginning (morning) of the Second Advent. This was the *first resurrection*—the gathering of the "first-fruits", the resurrection from/out of the dead of which the New Testament spoke and which was indicated by the woman in travail (Apoc. 12:1–2). The Old Testament "saints" would participate in it, and both the resurrected and the translated would receive their resurrection bodies and remain standing with Christ upon Mount Zion.¹²

We see from the above notation that the Irvingite rapture is part of the second coming. Thus, their doctrine teaches a brief interval between the rapture and the second advent, not a rapture followed by a multi-year tribulation and then a new event, the second coming. Patterson cites 74 examples of what he calls a "pretribulation rapture,"¹ however, after looking up each reference, it is clear that they are references to the second coming, as described above, that includes a translations of believers. This is not pretribulationism as taught by Darby, the Brethren or modern dispensationalist. Maranatha!

ENDNOTES

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.

¹ Patterson, "Designing," f.n. 87, p. 165.

³ 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.

⁴ Patterson and Walker, "'Our Unspeakable Comfort,'" pp. 114–15.

⁵ Patterson, "Designing," p. 76. See also, p. 62.

⁶ David Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain: A History from the 1730s to the 1980s* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1989), p. 89.

⁷ 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.

⁸ 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), p. 324.

⁹ Irving, "Preliminary Discourse," p. v.

¹⁰ Irving, "Preliminary Discourse," p. vi.

¹¹ Columba Graham Flegg, *'Gathered Under Apostles' A Study of the Catholic Apostolic Church* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), p. 434.

¹² Flegg, *'Gathered Under Apostles,'* p. 425.