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PROPHETIC DEVELOPMENTS
with particular reference to the early Brethren Movement.

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THE cynical may find some sources of macabre merriment in certain phases of Church history: and not least in that which is the subject of our present paper. At the close of the great apocalyptic discourse which is recorded for us in the twenty-fourth chapter of Matthew's Gospel, our Lord made the fact of His second advent the basis of a powerful appeal and warning to His disciples, and particularly against their human tendency to smite and quarrel amongst themselves. Is it not a supreme irony that around that very fact of the second advent some of the nastiest quarrels of the Church should have raged?

The study of prophecy has a perennial fascination. Few similar subjects can include on the rolls of their devotees names as notable and varied as those of the poet Dante, of Christopher Columbus, and of Napier the inventor of logarithms, of King James VI of Scotland and I of England, and of the great Sir Isaac Newton. Yet this very fascination has often been a jack-o-lantern, enticing devoted men into bypaths of fanaticism and bitter controversy: leading some indeed into the slough of downright error.

For that very reason, the subject of this paper can be given timely attention. We live in apocalyptic times, when the very minds of men are changing and their modes of thinking are being altered. At such times the Christian will always seek for some key to the events he sees unfolding, convinced as he is that behind them all is the disposing purpose of God. It is at just such a time that we can best examine what other Christians have thought and taught at similar crises: that we might learn by their mistakes, and, more important, that we might seek to understand why they believed as they did. Let us seek to sympathise even where we disagree. We tend to judge the originators of new lines of teaching by the perversions and banalities of the lesser minds which have sought to follow them. By obtaining a better historical perspective we shall correct this tendency, and learn that our fore-fathers were not as foolish as we, their successors, by our foolishness sometimes make them appear.

The title of this paper is 'Prophetic Developments, with particular reference to the early Brethren Movement'. In the paper I use the term *prophecy* in its popular sense, in place of the more accurate term *eschatology*. In order to trace those

developments, and to enable us to understand the place of the teaching of those early Brethren, I shall deal with my subject in five sections. First, I shall briefly refresh your minds on those central prophecies which for them formed the framework of prophetic interpretation, and from them shall deduce focal points of debate.

Second, I shall attempt to isolate those focal points, and to indicate the contending positions.

Third, I shall outline briefly the development of prophetic teaching down the years, showing how contemporary historical circumstances conditioned interpretations, which thus tended to follow the needs of the moment.

Fourth, in recounting the history of the developments in prophetic teaching, we shall arrive naturally at the early years of the nineteenth century, the period to which this paper is to pay especial attention. I shall then deal in general terms with the experiences and position of some of the early Brethren.

Finally, I suggest some practical lessons of the history.

Let us then refresh our minds on the central prophecies which formed the framework of classic prophetic interpretation. We can divide such apocalyptic Scriptures into four main groups.

1. There are the framework prophecies, the great apocalypses of Daniel and Revelation, which seem to outline a broad sweep of history. Allied to these are a number of shorter passages; notably our Lord's own apocalyptic discourse recorded in Matthew 24, Mark 13, and Luke 21, and various lesser passages filling out the detail, such as Paul's reference to a future man of sin in 2 Thess. 2.
2. Then there are the many references to the Second Advent of our Lord which are scattered throughout the New Testament, and with them we might link Old Testament references, such as Psalm 96:13.
3. Thirdly, there are frequent and widespread prophecies in the Old Testament of a future restoration of Israel from apostasy—scriptures such as Zech. 12 to 14—and predictions of a time of peace and glory, when Jerusalem will be the benign and beloved centre of all nations. With these Scriptures, many would link Romans 11.
4. Finally, there are the great consummation prophecies which transcend all debates and form the backcloth to all prophetic expectation: notably 2 Peter 3: 7—13 and 1 Cor. 15: 24—28.

Now it is plain that we can if we wish find a basic structure of prophetic interpretation in the outlines of Daniel and Revelation, and that the other Scriptures will either form a guide to that structure, or will find their place within its general scheme. The historical emphasis of this paper will not call for any discussion of the critical problems which cluster thickly around both the Apocalypses, nor will it call for a discussion of whether it is correct for us to look

to those books for such a framework of history. The men whose teachings we shall be considering were not concerned with those questions. Modern Biblical scholarship has of course revolutionised even a conservative view of these Scriptures, but our object here is to understand the thinking of men who knew nothing of its findings.

Let us then look more closely at those basic outlines.

Daniel's basic prophecies are found in chapter 2 (Nebuchadnezzar's image) and chapter 7 (the four beasts). Each vision gives a succession of four world empires, which the old expositors, with few exceptions, identified with the successive kingdoms of Babylon, Medo-Persia, Greece and Rome; and each vision follows that succession with the division and weakening of the fourth kingdom—the mixed clay and iron of the image's feet, or the ten horns of the fourth beast—and the overthrow of that fourth kingdom. This overthrow is symbolised in the vision of the image by the stone cut out without hands, which pulverised the image, and grew to fill the whole earth; and in the vision of the beasts by the judgment of the Ancient of Days and the destruction of the fourth beast. The vision of the beasts also contains the additional interesting detail of the 'little horn' growing up among the ten horns of the fourth beast and plucking up three of them; this 'little horn' had, you will recollect, human eyes and a 'mouth speaking great things', and its blasphemies eventually drew final destruction upon the beast. Elsewhere in Daniel we find:—1. The vision of the ram and the he-goat in chapter 8, notable for its reference to a period of 2,300 days as the time of treading underfoot of the sanctuary (a vision which at first sight was completely fulfilled in Antiochus Epiphanes, but which some project into the end days): 2. The famous prophecy of the 'Seventy Weeks' in chapter 9 (again seen by some as fulfilled by or shortly after the time of our Lord, and by others with a detached seventieth week projected into the end times): 3. The long and complicated prophecies of chapters 10 to 12, notable for the prophecy of a time of unprecedented trouble at the end, and the prophecies of periods of 1,290 and 1,335 days to a time of blessedness. Again, it has been a matter of debate whether any of this prophecy, and if any, how much, should be projected into the end times.

Turning next to the Revelation we find an even more controversial outline. You will recollect the leading features of the book: the seven letters to the churches; followed by the seven seals, portraying momentous events as each seal of the heavenly book is broken; then the seven trumpets; and later the seven plagues or vials poured out upon the earth. Between the trumpets and the vials come the strange visions of chapters 12 to 14: the women and the dragon, the two beasts from the sea and the earth (the first so reminiscent of the fourth beast of Daniel), the mystic number 666, and the glimpses into heaven of chapter 14. After the vials are further chapters describing the overthrow of Babylon, with the image

of the woman on the scarlet beast, followed by the sublime poetry of chapter 18, and then the triumph of the Lamb and the final state. These series of visions presented the old expositors with numerous difficulties. Were they concurrent, each going back over the same ground? Certainly, each series of Churches, Seals, Trumpets and Vials appeared to lead up to the silence of the ultimate state. Or were they consecutive: the Churches leading up to the beginning of the Seals, the seventh Seal containing the seven Trumpets, the seven Trumpets the seven Vials, and so on, rather like those intriguing sets of hollow cups which our children are given as playthings? Then did those visions represent events past, present or future: or were they symbolic of events which are recurring throughout history? Finally, they were faced with as vital a puzzle as any: for in chapter 20 is a suggestion that our Lord will reign on earth for a thousand years after the overthrow of 'Babylon', as a sort of dress rehearsal for the eternal state, but only for this period to close with a release of the forces of evil and further destruction before the final culmination. The idea appears illogical, and yet, for all the attempts made to explain the words otherwise, they seemed to remain adamant (although it will be noted that the passage does not explicitly state that our Lord will be present on earth during the thousand years.) This millennium was clearly a new feature, not readily apparent in the earlier prophecies of Daniel, or even of the Revelation itself, but nevertheless providing an interesting possibility for a literal fulfilment of those Old Testament prophecies of a future golden age to which we have already referred.

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Such, then are the great central prophecies on which thoughts were focussed. We now turn to isolate the features on which disputes tended to concentrate, and shall attempt to clarify the contending positions. In doing so, however, may I issue a warning on the dangers of such classification. However useful it may be in clarifying our thinking it can also set it into a hard mould. We shall rarely find in practice that our fellows will fall neatly into our mental categories. Our classifications are not a quarry for the brickbats of debate: we shall be the better Christians if we refrain from extending the orderliness of disciplined minds to the placing of neat little labels on our fellow men. May we also remember that it was rarely the truth of the Advent which was at stake in any of these disputes, but only the question of the time and manner of an event which our Lord tells us is known to His Father only. By and large, then, the greatest differences of understanding have collected around three matters:—

1. Around the interpretation of the book of Revelation, on which we can detect four main schools of thought :—

- a). The *Preterist*, which sees all (with the possible but not invariable exception of the very end of the book) as fulfilled in the first years of the Christian era, the age of persecution.
- b). The *Historicist*, which sees a developing fulfilment of the book throughout the Christian era, either on a repetitive or a consecutive basis of interpretation.
- c). The *Futurist*, which pictures a last great apostasy and a personal Antichrist arising at the End, and projects the fulfilment of most of the book (perhaps from chapter 4, or from chapter 6) into the era of this apostasy of the last days. Again, either a consecutive or a repetitive interpretation may be adopted. Finally, there is
- d). The *Idealist*, which sees the book as describing recurring features of history. This is a theory whose importance cannot be given its proper place in a paper such as this.

We need not, I think, dwell on a fifth theory advanced some years ago, which advanced the idea that the book describes the events at the time of the Creation!

- 2. The second centre of controversy is found in the Millennium. We have here three main views :—
 - a). The *A-millennial*, which cuts the knot of Revelation 20 by reading the passage symbolically: normally seeing in it the Church age as the period of Satan's binding—the strong man bound, to quote our Lord's parable. Strictly, of course, the term 'a-millennial' is a misnomer.
 - b). The *Pre-millennial*, which takes the passage literally, and looks forward to a literal personal reign of our Lord on this earth, with His Advent before its commencement. This view may or may not project into this millennium the fulfilment of the Old Testament prophecies of a golden age.
 - c). The *Post-millennial*, which compromises between the other two interpretations by seeing the fulfilment of the passage in a literal future golden age, but without the physical presence of our Lord on earth. This theory places the Second Advent at the close of the Millennium.

(In explanation of a term which may not be familiar to some, I must add here that the term 'chiliad', the Greek equivalent of the Latin-derived millennium', is sometimes used; a holder of 'millennial' views being termed a 'chiliast'. Usually this term has a pejorative connotation).

- 3. The third main difference centres on the Jewish race. Is the Jew to be restored literally to God's favour, with a literal fulfilment of the third group of prophecies, or is he not? Attitudes to this problem may depend on the one hand on the estimate of the bearing of such Scriptures as Gal. 3: 7, and whether Gal. 6: 16—'the Israel of God'—is interpreted as referring to the Church: and on the other hand on the estimate of the fact of the evident

survival of the Jews as a distinct race and entity against all probabilities, when that fact is interpreted in the light of the over-ruling providence of God.

Now I think that it is important that we should isolate these three centres of dispute from each other, for they are too often confused. It is perfectly possible, for example, for a Futurist in interpretation of Revelation to be an A-millennialist: in point of fact, Ribera the Jesuit, who is popularly credited with having first put forward a developed Futurism, was himself an A-millennialist. On the other hand, while many Historicists are also A-millennialist, others of the classic Protestant Historicists, including the notable Joseph Mede who powerfully influenced the Westminster divines, have also been Pre-millennialist. Similarly, a belief in the literal restoration of the Jews is not essential to a Futurist scheme of interpretation. There is one further point which I must mention before we leave our classification. It is important to remember that within each division are many sub-divisions. It is helpful to our perspective, for example, to remember that the 'Rapture', the 'Tribulationist' and the 'Partial Rapture' schools, whose disputes have bulked so large in some old fashioned circles, are themselves only subdivisions of the Futurist school. Further, these subdivisions are apt to play ducks and drakes with our careful classifications: we must always expect in studying prophecy to find the strangest bedfellows on any particular point of interpretation.

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And now, leaving the foundation, we can turn to the main structure. I have already indicated that we shall first consider the background of development of prophetic ideas down the years, before turning to look in detail at the position in the early nineteenth century. Let us then consider this general background.

It is here useful to notice one interesting fact. Almost invariably interpretation has been vitiated by the reluctance or incapacity of commentators to visualise their own age as other than the end time. As a consequence, beliefs are in a constant state of revision and restatement. We are reminded of a certain newspaper pundit of the first world war, who is reported to have prophesied at regular half-yearly intervals throughout its course that the war would end within six months. Eventually, of course, he was correct, and claimed due credit for his prescience. 'When we see how powerfully the resultant stimuli of such 'incorrect' interpretations have influenced men for good, we may well raise the question as to whether prophecy has a subjective value for each generation, rather than, or in addition to, an objective value for the interpretation of history.

Few fragments have survived from the earliest years of the Church's history, and it would be wrong to read into the ideas of such fragments as we have any of our modern formulated systems. Their one supreme hope was the Second Advent,

and detail was of secondary importance. The earliest fathers, such as Clement of Rome and Ignatius, seem to have looked for an ‘any moment’ Advent; but they were passing through tribulation, and the modern disputes which centre around that ‘any moment’ phrase would have been singularly meaningless to them. As the years went by, ideas became more definite. The majority seem to have looked for a personal Antichrist and an earthly millennium—Irenaeus (c.130—c.202), indeed, looking for a personal Antichrist reigning for 3½ years, before the Advent and Millennial reign. Hippolytus (c.236) foreshadowed modern futurism by separating the 70th week of Daniel 9 and projecting it into the future reign of Antichrist. Victorinus (c.303) seems indeed to have hinted at some form of rapture (if not partial rapture), removing the Church, or at least the ‘good’, to avoid persecution to come.¹

Now these features are interesting. It would be pressing things too far to read the modern futurist outlook into these early teachings. Indeed, living as these men did at the very beginning of things, they could not have been other than futurist; today we stand historically on very different ground. Yet it is apparent that the chief features of modern futurism had all appeared in the earliest days of the Church’s history, and in fairness we must emphasise this. It is misleading, to say the least, to attribute their origin solely to Ribera and those who came after him.

Another interesting feature also arises from those early days, for in them we find arising those strangely persistent pieces of ‘Christian folklore’, often derived from Jewish or pagan sources, which are still familiar to us today. I can still remember hearing as a child—and indeed heard it repeated only a short time ago—that Antichrist would be a Jew of the tribe of Dan. It is fascinating to find some of the earliest Fathers putting forward the same idea. So, too, we find prevalent in those early days a linking of the Millennium of Revelation 20 with ideas, derived from Judaism, that the 6 days of creation were typical of six millennia of this world’s history: the future blessed Reign being the 6th (or sometimes the 7th). What are we to say, then, when we find a writer in a Christian monthly for May 1959 stating that some have linked Ussher’s creation date of 4004 B.C. ‘with a popular theory that as a thousand years are as a day in God’s sight, so man will be upon the earth for 6,000 years until A.D. 1996, after which will come the Millennium’?

It was this very type of speculation which soon led to the discrediting of Millenarianism. Fantastic and exaggerated ideas were adopted from Jewish and sub-Christian mythology, surrounding both the expectation of Antichrist and the millennial reign. A reaction was inevitable, and its way was made clear by the exegetical methods of Origen (c.185—c.254), who succeeded in opening the way

1. The facts quoted in the general survey are taken in the main from the first three volumes of LeRoy E. Froom, *The Prophetic Faith of our Fathers* (1950). The Victorinus reference appears at Vol 1, p. 340, and appears in his exposition of the sixth seal (Rev. 6:14).

to an allegorisation of almost anything in Scripture of which one wished to be rid. Gradually the sympathies of more responsible men were estranged from ideas of a literal Millennium, popularly identified as it was with fantastic beliefs, and found in Origen's method a simple means of parrying the force of awkward passages.

Then came a startling change in the Church's fortunes. Constantine became Roman Emperor, and with his Edict of Toleration in 313 the position of the Church changed almost overnight. From being a persecuted and despised minority, the Christian Church became the favoured religion of the Empire. Was it any wonder that contemporary Christians believed that in this unexpected way they were seeing the fulfilment of their prophecies: that the millennial reign was even now beginning with a spiritual, rather than a physical presence of Christ? The career of the historian Eusebius (c.260—c.340) typified the beginnings of this tendency. From a belief in an imminent Second Advent, he turned to see the New Jerusalem prophecies being fulfilled on earth—Constantine had overthrown the dragon of Rev. 12. and the Kingdom was surely dawning in the earthly Church. Isaiah 35 was coming true before their eyes! And with the great heresies, the struggles over Arianism and other distortions of Christian belief, in the forefront of interest, there developed a tendency to look not for a personal Antichrist, but for an Antichrist in an apostasizing element in the Church.

Yet one great prophecy restrained the full development of these tendencies. Had not the great framework of Daniel's four kingdoms stood the test of history? And Daniel's prophecies showed that the fourth kingdom would be broken—and from its ruins would arise the blasphemer with 'his mouth speaking great things'. Did not Paul speak in the second Thessalonian letter of that same 'man of sin', 'the son of perdition; who opposeth and exalteth himself above all that is called God', and then go on to hint at a restraining power which for the moment hindered his manifestation, but which would eventually be taken out of the way? Would not the Wicked One then be revealed, to be consumed by the Lord—destroyed 'with the brightness of His coming?' There could be only one such restraining power: the Roman Empire—the fourth Kingdom, after whose collapse Antichrist would arise. So, for the moment, the traditional literalist expectations held generally good. Then—soon after the year 400—the expected began to happen: the Roman Empire began to crumble, and in 410 the Goths sacked Rome itself. Listen to Jerome (c.340-420), strongly anti-millennial, yet looking for a personal Antichrist and the Advent to follow:—

'He that letteth is taken out of the way, and yet we do not realise that Antichrist is near. Yes, Antichrist is near whom the Lord Jesus Christ "shall consume with the spirit of His mouth" . . . Savage tribes in countless numbers have over-run all parts of Gaul. The whole country between the Alps and the Pyrenees, between the Rhine and the Ocean has been laid waste . . . The once noble city of Mainz has been captured and destroyed. In its church many thousands have been massacred.

The people of Worms after standing a long siege have been extirpated. The powerful city of Rheims, the Ambiani, the Altrebatae, the Belgians in the skirts of the world, Tournai, Spires and Strassburg have fallen to Germany: while the provinces of Aquitaine and of the Nine Nations, of Lyons and of Narbonne are with the exception of a few cities one universal scene of desolation.'

And on another occasion he could write:—

'The Roman world is falling: yet we hold up our heads instead of bowing them'.

There could hardly be a nobler tribute to the sustaining power of a true faith. Are we not taking a very narrow, earthly, view if—despite history's verdict—we say that the prophetic premises on which it was founded were entirely mistaken?

Yet Rome fell—and Antichrist did not come. The old views were apparently discredited. Had men been mistaken after all? Were there other explanations of the prophetic Scriptures? The very age of Jerome produced an answer through one of the greatest names in the history of the Church: the great Augustine. The clue had been given by the Donatist Tichonius, who suggested that just as it was possible to interpret the visions of the Seals, the Trumpets, and the Vials as recapitulations of the same history, so Revelation 20 could be taken as a further recapitulation of the history of the Church. Tichonius saw the millennium (which for some reason he fixed at 350 years) as the period of the present 'remnant' church. Augustine, turning from his earlier millenarianism, took up this idea; but applied it to the Imperial Catholic Church. Here, before their eyes, was growing on earth the Kingdom of Christ. Surely, the old ideas of a quick personal Advent of our Lord were wrong: here was the stone, filling all the world: Daniel's kingdom of 'the saints of the most High.' Satan had been bound at the victory of our Lord—the first resurrection was a symbol of the new birth—the 1,000 years were the present Church age. Not until a brief 3½ years at the end would Satan be loosed, and Antichrist arise, only to be destroyed for ever. The Church Militant was becoming the Church Triumphant.

It is easy, from our vantage point in time, to see how this interpretation provided a basis for all the abuses of later papal power and claims: but let us place ourselves again in Augustine's age and seek to understand the reasons for his doctrine, and we shall profit ourselves much more. The passage of time had discredited the old views—and a brilliant mind arose to reinterpret the prophecies in the light of events. It was a story to be repeated more than once. The facts of history were with Augustine. Soon it was apparent that the old interpretation of Daniel's framework of the ages had been too facile—and Augustine's theory swept the field. As the civil authority of Rome disappeared, the Popes of Rome assumed more and more power—and Augustine's theory assured them that they were advancing the Kingdom of God: that they were in fact the heavenly Kingdom. Strangely, the rise of Mohammedanism had less influence on prophetic

interpretation than might have been expected—though here was an Antichrist indeed, and there were some commentators who remarked the fact.

But as the centuries passed suspicions grew that all was not well, even with Augustine's theory. Absolute power corrupted absolutely, even on the papal throne, and papal claims grew ever more arrogant and intolerable. Men began to look afresh at Daniel's prophecies: and this tendency was strengthened by that strange preoccupation with the nature of Antichrist which haunted all this medieval period, and the Reformation period which followed it. It seems to be a danger haunting any scheme of interpretation which looked for a future Antichrist before the Advent, that men's expectations can turn from the Glorious Hope to a morbid looking for their bitter adversary (not of course that this objection invalidates the thesis!). But men again remembered that Daniel had spoken of the 'little horn' arising from the wreck of the Fourth Kingdom 'speaking great things.' Paul had enlarged this prophecy with the prediction of the son of perdition who 'as God sitteth in the temple of God, shewing himself that he is God'. What if this description of Antichrist were being fulfilled in the Papacy itself—if it were already enthroned in the Papal chair? The deduction was too obvious not to be made, and voices began to whisper it abroad. Millenarian ideas also began to re-enter through such teachers as Joachim of Flora (c1130 —1202), and the 'spirituals' who adopted his ideas. Finally the doubts were given expression in a manner which could not be hid. In the year 1241, Eberhard II, Archbishop of Salzburg, championing his emperor Frederick II at the Council of Regensburg, dramatically and in detail identified the Pope with Daniel's 'little horn' and the Antichrist of the New Testament. The words, once out, could not be recalled.

Soon the world was scandalised by rival Popes at Rome and Avignon, and bitter personal and political struggles around the Papal courts. Voices of reform grew louder—and to them all was given this weapon against the corruptions of Romanism so conveniently provided by Daniel and St. Paul. Outside the Roman church the dissenting groups such as the Waldenses had long used it. Wycliffe and the Lollards in Britain, Hus in Bohemia, Savonarola in Florence, turned to prophecy for their inspiration. Yet, for a time, it seemed to be in vain, and all reform within the church and heresies with out at last seemed crushed by bitter persecution. The Fifth Lateran Council proclaimed all opposition to the Papacy as crushed, and put its own gloss on prophecy—the Catholic Church was the Holy New Jerusalem, established on earth. Every dissenting voice had ceased, and in future no man must publicly expound the doctrine of Antichrist, or use the new invention of printing to produce an uncensored book.

A few months later, on 31st October 1517, a monk named Martin Luther posted ninety-five theses for debate on the door of the castle church at Wittenberg. The Reformation had begun.

In the circumstances of their time, the Reformers could have only one interpretation of prophecy. The description of the ‘little horn’ and Paul’s ‘man of sin’ fitted the persecuting Papacy like a glove. And so the classical Protestant historicism arose, sounding the call of separation from Rome, the seat of Antichrist. Some indeed (as Luther himself) bracketed Mohammedanism with Romanism, but this hardly affected the main scheme. Luther was for some time uncertain of the authentic city of the Revelation, as was Zwingli, and for this reason the millennium did not figure prominently in their schemes: others, as Calvin and Heinrich Bullinger, while seeing the Pope as Antichrist, retained the a-millennial interpretations of Augustine. Above all, the Reformers were sustained amid the fires, metaphorical and literal, of persecution, by the inspiration that they were standing firm for the kingdom of Christ, against the power of Antichrist. Let us ask, as we asked of Jerome: can we say that they were entirely mistaken?

Subsequent interpretation, as the years passed, grew more varied. Millennial ideas again became prominent, as men grew dissatisfied with the strain which, on any showing, a metaphorical interpretation of the first part of Revelation 20 appears to place on the text. By the time of the Westminster Assembly in 1643, the influence of Joseph Mede (1586-1638) had secured for historicist millenarianism an influential place among the divines of that Assembly, although the Confession was careful to avoid the issue. From the Confession it becomes clear that historicism can be as much an ‘any moment’ theory as ‘Secret Rapture’ futurism.

An interesting twist was given to the prophecies by some of the extremer Puritans who, like the Fifth Monarchy Men, looked for a future millennial Kingdom of the saints to be set up by fire and sword. We might trace their influence in Cromwell’s speech at the opening of the Little Parliament of 1653—

‘Why should we be afraid to say or think, that *this* may be the door to usher in the Things that God has promised; which have been prophesied of; which He has set the hearts of His people to wait for and expect? . . . We are at the threshold . . . And we have thought, some of us, that it is our duties to *endeavour* this way; not merely to *look* at that Prophecy in Daniel “And the Kingdom shall not be delivered to another people.”

Had Cromwell’s ‘kingdom’ been destined to the long life of the papacy, we might have seen the Augustinian history strangely repeating itself.

The weakness of all historicism is its passion for date fixing. Even Luther was not free from this weakness, nor, in a later century, was Wesley. The extremer elements soon began to bring disrepute upon prophetic interpretations. It was a tendency which would have a strange climax in a later century. Meanwhile, the papal counter-reformation was not sitting quietly beneath the slur of Antichrist, and two Jesuits, Francesco Ribera (1537-1591) and Luis de Alcazar (1554-1613)

produced detailed studies of Revelation in which very different interpretations were advanced. Ribera projected the whole book after the sixth seal into the future age of Antichrist, although still retaining a modified Augustinian view of the Millennium as the Christian era, during which he saw the saints as reigning in heaven rather than on earth. He is thus often considered the father of modern futurism. Alcazar, on the other hand, saw the Catholic Church as the New Jerusalem, and the Apocalypse entirely descriptive of the early struggles of the Church to obtain the felicity of that end (although he saw Revelation 20 as depicting the final persecution of Antichrist). Alcazar thus came to be regarded as the father of the Preterist school. The Preterist view was taken into Protestantism by Grotius (1583-1645) and Henry Hammond (1605-1660), and in later centuries became popular with those who took a more liberal view of Scripture. The subsequent history of Futurism will appear from this paper.

There is one fresh theory in the field of prophetic interpretation which we must note before we reach the period of more detailed interest to us. Daniel Whitby (1638-1726) produced an interesting new solution to the millennial difficulty. The first resurrection of Rev.20 he spiritualised like Augustine: but considered that its fulfilment would be in a future conversion of the world. He looked for a future restoration of the Jews (an idea which was beginning to take strong hold in Britain) and considered that this would take place about the time of this world conversion. By this theory the millennium was certainly a future state, but the reign of Christ during its course was a spiritual reign, and His kingdom a natural earthly one. The Second Advent would take place at the end of this millennium. This theory became astonishingly popular: it suited the rationalist temper of the times, and later the comfortably optimistic views which accompanied the early years of modern scientific discovery. It was an obvious companion to the bland idea that the world would grow better and better. Many trace modern post-millennialism to Whitby, but others give it a much longer pedigree.

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So we approach the period of revolutionary changes in prophetic insight which is the object of our detailed interest. As we do so, let us go back and pick up the story of Protestant Historicism. The Protestant Reformation became established, and as the fires of martyrdom waned, the immediate incentive presented by the idea of a papal Antichrist diminished. Speculation began to run riot, and date fixing became a popular pastime. Many of these dates appeared to cluster around the close of the eighteenth century. In this connection we must remark again the tendency which has always characterised the date-fixer, to see himself as living near the end of the age. Thus the consummation usually tends to be fixed for a

date not more than a century or so ahead. On this basis, someone, sometime, is bound to be right in some prediction. Perhaps we should attach no more significance than this to the story which follows.

The shorter periods of prophecy seemed long ago exhausted, but one still appeared to offer hope. What was that mysterious 1260 days (otherwise 42 months, or 3½ years, or a time, times and a half) which recurred so frequently in Daniel and the Apocalypse? Still available also were the 2,300 days of Daniel 8, which *might* not refer only to Antiochus Epiphanes. Be that as it may, interpreters were still casting about for a commencing date for their predictions, and a number began to fix on the era of the great Justinian, who in 533 had issued a decree recognising the Pope as 'Head of the Church' and 'Head of all the holy Priests of God', and in 538 had recovered Rome from the Goths and liberated the Pope there. Were these the beginnings of the 1260 year-days of the papal Antichrist? If so, those 1260 years would last until about 1800. Drue Cressener (c. 1638-1718) foretold a blow to fall on the papacy about 1800. Sir Isaac Newton (1642-1727), who also looked for a restoration of the Jews, foresaw a revolution of infidelity putting a stop to popedom before the restoration of primitive Christianity. By far the most remarkable of these expositors was Robert Fleming, Jr. (c. 1660-1716) who, in 1701, at a time when French power was at its zenith under Louis XIV, foretold from the Revelation that the French Monarchy would be humbled 'at least before 1794', and that the fifth vial, which was to be poured out on the seat of the Beast, would last from 1794 to about 1848. In point of fact, by 1793 the French Revolution was at its height, while 1848 was, of course, the European 'Year of Revolutions', when, among other events, the Pope had to leave Rome for a time. (For those who are inclined to take Fleming's interpretations particularly seriously after this remarkable double prediction, it is worth noting that he also foretold the Second Advent for the year 2000!)²

Whatever our estimate of these interpretations from the vantage point of another 170 years, we need little imagination to picture the sensation which was caused among those interested in prophetic study when Fleming's commentary, together with those of others in a similar but vaguer vein, was republished at the time of the French Revolution. What, then, when in 1798 the Pope was actually expelled from Rome by Napoleon's victorious general, and it was pointed out that this was precisely 1260 years after the freeing of Rome from Goths in 538?

Historicism had in fact reached its zenith. Its remarkable interpretations appeared at last to be coming true. For centuries men had wrestled with those obscure prophecies of Daniel and the Revelation: and now at last they were being fulfilled before their eyes. Interpretation gave way to a flood of excited speculation. If these dates had proved correct, so would others. The sixth vial

² For a full account of the prophecies of Fleming and others see Froom, *op. cit.*, Vol. 2, pp. 642-730. Did they know of the odd prophecies of Nostradamus (1503-1566)?

surely referred to the Turkish empire—then, within a few years the Turkish Empire would break up, and Armageddon was near. The end days were upon them and in a few decades the culmination of all things would be seen. A considerable number of these prophecies centred on the middle 1840's. Respectable, prominent and scholarly names were associated with a flurry of date fixing—names as reliable and eminent as those of Bishop Daniel Wilson, or Joseph Wolff the intrepid Jewish missionary and traveller, and many others. Historicism flared up like a super nova—and burned itself out.³

It is essential that we understand this background to those early years of the nineteenth century if we are to appreciate correctly the position of the leaders of the early Brethren movement. The movement, born in the late 1820's and early 1830's, took shape in an era of intense prophetic speculation, when the classical historicist views were on the point of discrediting themselves. Furthermore, another force was looming on the horizon: the power of a godless rationalism and glorification of man, a potential persecuting power as bitter as the troops of any Roman pontiff—and a power for which the old theories, which saw their antichrist in Rome, made as little allowance as they made for the growing apostasy of Protestantism itself. Historicism, in fact, centred itself upon Europe and Europe's civilisation, and to the wider world outlook it had nothing to say. I do not believe that the Brethren movement was the child, as Neatby suggests, of the study of unfulfilled prophecy,⁴ but it was inevitable that, born when it was, the study of unfulfilled prophecy should powerfully shape its course. It is of interest that another movement born at the same time—the Tractarian Movement—also largely renounced the historicist interpretations for the futurist (a tendency hastened in that movement by its Romeward trend, which obviously could not regard the papacy as Antichrist.).

So we must go back and trace this futurist interpretation which was in so many circles to supersede the old historicism. Ribera, it will be remembered, had put forward a futurist scheme some 250 years before, in an attempt to absolve the papacy from the reproach of Antichrist. At the turn of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, a very different Catholic writer had adopted his views. Manuel Lacunza (1731-1801), a Jesuit of Chile, had been expelled with his order from that country, and went first to Spain and then to Italy, where he became an anchorite. There he devoted himself entirely to the study of the Scriptures, and for 20 years was engaged in writing his book *'The Coming of the Messiah in Glory and Majesty'*. Distressed by corruptions in the Roman church, his work may have followed Ribera's ideas, but it was far removed in purpose from Ribera's. In his

³ For the expositions referred to here see Froom, op. cit., Vol. 2, pp. 731 et. seq., and Vol. 3, pp. 338-409 and 461-529. For Wilson see pp. 617-622. There is also an interesting reminiscence in an address of George Muller at Clifton on 5 October, 1870.

⁴ *History of the Plymouth Brethren*, 2nd edn., 1902, p. 339.

dedication he wrote—‘I desire and purpose to stir up and even to oblige the priests to shake off the dust from their Bibles, inviting them to a new study and examination, a new and more attentive consideration of that Divine Book . . .’ His scheme was largely futurist, and his Antichrist would arise in an apostate Roman Church, the signs of which were already present: the title of the book describes its central theme— the glorious Second Advent.

Lacunza had no illusions as to the reception of his book by the Roman hierarchy. He wrote under a pen name, *Ben-Ezra*, and at first his book was circulated privately in manuscript form. Yet even in that form it had wide influence. Eventually, well after his death, the book was printed secretly in Spain in 1812. The book caused something of a sensation, and was translated into many languages. Two English translations appeared, one by the celebrated Edward Irving, and thus the book enters importantly into our story. As Andrew Miller, a 19th Century ‘Exclusive Brother’, wrote

‘It pleased the Lord to revive in many minds during the first quarter of the present century, a deep interest in the restoration of Israel to their own land, and the consequent glory of Messiah’s reign. Several books were published on this subject between the years 1812-1825. But the one which created the greatest interest is entitled “The coming of Messiah in glory and majesty” by a South American Roman Catholic priest, Emmanuel Lacunza, who adopted the nom-de-plume of Ben-Ezra, a converted Jew . . . It was translated into English, and published in London in 1827, with a long preliminary discourse by the Rev. Edward Irving. His powerful eloquence was now employed . . .’⁵

in propagating the teachings of the book. As for the Roman authorities, the inevitable happened. In 1824 the book was placed on the Roman Index.

The quotation from Miller mentions another feature which had become prominent in Britain. You will remember that I have made references to expectations by one or two writers of a future restoration of the Jews. This expectation had led to the foundation of the London Society for Promoting Christianity Amongst the Jews in 1808 or 9—the Society from which sprang the Church Mission to the Jews. The Society had early fallen on bad times, and then the man it needed appeared. Lewis Way (1772-1840), an Oxford M.A. and a barrister, received, it is said, an unexpected and very large fortune as a legacy from a stranger in blood of the same name, stipulating that it was to be used ‘for the glory of God’. It is certain that Way took Anglican orders, and devoted his life and much of his fortune to the welfare of the Jews; among other matters reorganising and reconstructing the London Society, which under his leadership

⁵ *The Brethren: their Origin, Progress and Testimony*, undated, p. 5.

became very prominent, patronised whole heartedly by such men as William Wilberforce, Charles Simeon and the banker Henry Drummond.

Way's interest in the Jews had been stirred, it is said, in a strange manner. He was reported to have been riding in Devonshire, when his attention was attracted by an estate which he was passing, and he was told of a local legend that an old lady had stipulated in her will that the trees were not to be cut down until the Jews were restored to Palestine. Whether the story were true or not, it stirred Way's interest, and on his return he devoted himself to study of what the Scriptures had to say on the subject. The result was that he became a whole-hearted exponent of the belief in the Jew's restoration, and a zealous student of prophecy.⁶

It was at Way's suggestion that the next stage in our story took place. In view of the intense interest in prophecy which then existed, he suggested to his banker friend Henry Drummond that a private conference should assemble for the study of prophetic teachings. Drummond eagerly fell in with the suggestion, and obtained the support of the rector of his home parish, Hugh McNeile (later Dean of Ripon and a prominent evangelical churchman and expositor of prophecy.). So it was that the famous Albury Conferences, held at Drummond's country seat at Albury near Guildford, were convened, assembling at least in the earlier years some of the flower of evangelical belief from all denominations. Among them was Edward Irving, brilliant Scottish preacher from London, whose eloquence was having a great impact on all circles, and who sponsored Lacunza's book while the conferences were being held.⁷

The first conference was held at Advent 1826, and Irving's account indicates the trend of interpretation there:— They

'believed in common that the present form of the dispensation of the Gospel was for a time commensurate with the times of the Gentiles, which are again commensurate with the period of Jerusalem's being trodden underfoot, and of the Jew's dispersion; that the restoration of the Jews would introduce a new era into the Church and the world, which might be called the universal dispensation of the benefits of Christ's death, while this is the dispensation to the Church only, which is few compared with the whole. That the conclusion of the latter in great judgments, and the commencements of the former in great mercies, was hard at hand, yea even at the very door; all being agreed that the 1260 and 1290 days of Daniel were accomplished, and the remaining 45 begun, at the conclusion of which the blessedness will be fully arrived.'⁸

⁶ See Balteine. *A History of the Evangelical Party in the Church of England* (1908), pp. 256-7.

⁷ Details of the Albury conferences and the associated developments of Irvingism are taken from Edward Miller, *The History & Doctrines of Irvingism* (1878), Vol. 1.

⁸ Quoted Edward Miller op. cit., Vol. 1, pp. 38.9.

A Conference was held annually for five years until 1830, but it would appear that as they continued interpretations became more and more dogmatic, precise dates were fixed, and some of those attending were repelled. One amusing (but possibly apocryphal) incident is recorded as taking place during the second conference. News was brought that a son of Napoleon had just died, but one of the party flatly refused to believe it. In his interpretation, that son was already marked out as 'The Beast'! (The report was in fact incorrect. The Duke of Reichstadt did not die until 1832).

Four influences are apparent in or about these conferences : —

1. We are at a transition stage, with historical views held, but an awakening interest in futurist writers.
2. Immediately after these Conferences the teaching of the ' Secret Rapture' of the Church (namely, that the Second Advent will take place in two stages, the first being a rapture' of the Church before the Great Tribulation, from which she is thus delivered) became prominent. This teaching is a variation of futurism, and was apparently unknown before this time, although, as we have seen, Victorinus had hinted at a not dissimilar idea in the third or fourth century. We remember, on the other hand, that the prophetic scriptures were now being given a closer and more detailed study than ever before, and new teachings might be expected to emerge from that study. The exact origin of the teaching of the 'Secret Rapture' is obscure, but in some recorded but unpublished reminiscences, B. W. Newton, the prophetic teacher who was so prominent in the early Brethren movement, suggests that Irving introduced it at one of the Albury conferences. Newton was at Oxford at the time, and although he did not attend the conferences, so far as we know, a friend with whom he was in close touch at Oxford, Dr. William Marsh, did attend the Albury conferences; so Newton's reminiscence may not be unfounded. We shall have more to say of this later.⁹
3. It is apparent from the quotation which has been cited from Irving's account of the first conference that there was already in existence a tendency towards unduly 'dispensationalising' God's dealings with mankind. This again will be developed later.
4. Another interesting development which arose about this time, and was fostered by the conferences, was an expectation in some quarters that at the times of the end the Pentecostal gifts would be restored. Prominent in urging this was the Anglican, James Haldane Stewart (1776-1854), who attended the Albury

⁹ A number of references to B. W. Newton in the paper are based on unpublished reminiscences of Newton contained in a MS. in the possession of Mr. C.F. Fry of Newport, I.O.W., to whom grateful acknowledgments are expressed. Quotations referenced to this note are taken from this same source [Ed.'s note: the MS is now in the Christian Brethren Archive, John Rylands University Library of Manchester].

conferences.¹⁰ In March 1830, there was therefore considerable excitement when news came of an outbreak of ‘tongues’ in a village near Glasgow, and the fifth and final Albury Conference in July of that year stressed the duty of praying for a personal possession of those gifts. From such details of these ‘tongues’ as are available it does not seem that they included coherent utterances. They were soon after followed by faith healings in the same group of persons.’¹¹ Among those whose interest was aroused by the news was the small group of persons which even then was beginning to coalesce as one of the early Brethren groups. It seems that either J.N. Darby, or G.V. Wigram (or possibly both) investigated these outbreaks at the instigation of B.W. Newton. Newton’s reminiscences state that they rejected the gifts (for the reason, if his reminiscences are accurate on this point, that the group concerned did not hold the literal restoration of Israel).¹² The group exercising the gifts were a few purely private and rather ignorant persons, and as yet unconnected with Irving.

The incipient Brethren movement was thus delivered from this first of the snares which waited in its path—but not so another movement which arose at the same time. Irving was condemned by the London Presbytery of the Church of Scotland in October 1830 because of certain doctrines he had promulgated on the human nature of our Lord. It is fair to add that the critical historian of the Irvingite movement, the Anglican clergyman Edward Miller, writes of him that ‘Irving really drifted into the error, which in his case had more of intellectual inadvertence than of positive heresy . . . Nothing was really further from his mind than to do any dishonour at all to the Lord, whose love, and mercy, and influence, and sway on the hearts and lives of His people Irving was striving to exalt. Had he been met in a spirit of large-minded love he might have withdrawn his perilous and unsound statements.’¹³

Irving’s disciples rallied to him, and, excited by his eloquence, commenced to pray for gifts similar to those which had appeared in Scotland. Eventually, in October 1831 the ‘tongues’ began to appear in Irving’s own church. They had already appeared once elsewhere in London, and also in private gatherings, over the previous six months. At first the utterances did not appear to take coherent form, but soon they began to incorporate some of the distinctive doctrines promulgated by Irving, including the Secret Rapture teaching.¹⁴ From this some have alleged that the teaching derived from such a source, but B. W. Newton’s own reminiscences (which are of particular value, as coming from an ardent opponent of the teaching) indicate that the doctrine was already being taught at

¹⁰ From, *op. cit.*, Vol. 3, p. 524, 528-9, also Newton’s reminiscences.

¹¹ Edward Miller, *op. cit.*, Vol. 1, pp. 52, et. seq.

¹² See n. 9 above.

¹³ *op. cit.*, p. 86.

¹⁴ See n. 7 above.

Plymouth before the outbreaks of tongues in Irving's church had started, or at least taken coherent shape. Indeed, if Darby and others had already rejected the 'tongues', as Newton tells us they had, they were not likely to take a new doctrine from that source.¹⁵

The outbreaks of 'gifts' spread like wildfire, causing especial damage to the always despised evangelical cause at Oxford. Among those in Oxford who were swept off their feet by the craze was B. W. Newton's friend Henry Bellenden Bulteel, erstwhile curate of St. Ebbe's church in Oxford, who had in one year seen some 75 undergraduates converted under his ministry. Newton himself may well have owed conversion to him. Newton never forgot those days, and carried into later life a violent opposition to Irvingism, and to the Secret Rapture teaching which he identified with it.¹⁶ This opposition was to have important results in the infant Brethren movement. As for Irving himself, he was finally excommunicated by the Church of Scotland in 1833, having been deprived of his London church in the previous year. His followers opened a new church for him, where, prematurely aged and a sick man, he found the 'supernatural' powers too great for him, and watched helplessly while they dominated his followers and swept on into the eccentric movement in which he had so little part, but which, ironically, will always be the phenomenon by which men will remember him. Worn out and disillusioned, he died of consumption only eighteen months after.

Meanwhile the Albury studies had passed into saner channels. In October 1831, the year after the last conference at Albury, Lady Powerscourt threw open her home in Ireland to a similar but larger gathering, under the chairmanship of the Rector of Powerscourt, the Rev. Robert Daly, later Bishop of Cashel.¹⁷ In general the conferences apparently eschewed the 'gifts' as a painful subject and the discussions appear to have been more moderate than at Albury. Unfortunately, not a lot of information survives as to these conferences, but it is known that prominent among those present were leaders among the early Brethren, with whom Lady Powerscourt was in close sympathy (indeed, it is said that Darby almost married her). Another notable participant was the Rev. W. Burgh, later

¹⁵ See note 9 above.

¹⁶ See n.9 above.

¹⁷ Scanty details of the Powercourt conferences are available as follows:—

First meeting (1831), Froom, *op. cit.*, Vol. 3, pp. 584-5 (quoting from the *Dublin Christian Herald*)

2nd meeting (1832). Letters of J. N. Darby, Vol. 1, p. 5 (date 15 Oct., 1832) (quoting from the *Dublin Christian Herald*). 3rd meeting (1833). *The Diary & Letters of Henry Craik* (1866), pp. 166-9.

By the courtesy of Mr. O.W. Ware of Capetown, the author has seen a copy of notes by Miss A. M. Stoney a contemporary of the conferences, which indicate that in the three following years smaller conferences were held in a Dublin hotel. These were apparently more exclusively Brethren affairs, and the conferences came to an end with Lady Powerscourt's death in December, 1836.

known as de Burgh, who was a leading early exponent of the futurist viewpoint. Burgh too, was in touch with those early Brethren: in the preface to his famous *Englishman's Greek Concordance of the New Testament*, G.V. Wigram describes how he had derived part of the general plan of that work from Burgh during a meeting with him at Powerscourt in March 1831. In recalling one of his own attendances at Powerscourt, B. W. Newton, late in life, speaks of Burgh. 'It was a meeting of the elite of Evangelicals, as many as 400; but (de Burgh) and I were the only two who took the same view of things . . .' We may suppose that Newton's later isolation may have coloured his remembrances, but the testimony is significant and important, for both de Burgh and Newton held that the second Advent would be in one stage only, and thus rejected the Secret Rapture. This does not necessarily indicate, of course, that all the others present did hold that view, as there were doubtless sufficient other points of prophetic interpretation on which to differ!¹⁸

Some of the leaders of the Brethren seem to have been cautious in their attitude to these further conferences. Newton, who had attended the first, and a small group at Plymouth, seem indeed to have arranged a study of their own in Plymouth at the time of the second Powerscourt conference in 1832, as a form of protest against the 'indefiniteness (as Newton later termed it) of that Conference. By that term, Newton apparently described the wide range of views permitted in the Irish centre.¹⁹ The divisions were beginning to harden: most of those early Brethren were futurist, but Newton was violently opposed to the Secret Rapture teaching, while many of the Irish group were distinctly favourable to it. Others, such as Captain Hall of Plymouth, were also strongly taken with the teaching, and already it was a serious stumbling block to the fellowship in Plymouth. Darby, himself, seemed for the moment undecided—yet it was his powerful personality which later was to carry the teaching far and wide, and to convert to it many who, like Wigram, at first opposed it.

Interestingly, Henry Craik and George Müller from Bristol now appear on the scene. Müller had come to London from Germany to be trained as a missionary by the London Society for Promoting Christianity Among the Jews (it is of interest that Newton was also a local representative of that Society while at Oxford). Then, in 1829, Müller, on convalescence at Teignmouth, had met Henry Craik. Both were opening their minds to new paths of faith and doctrine, and among them were the current prophetic expectations—but although they adopted the new futurist teachings, they did not adopt the Secret Rapture teaching.

Craik had been for a time tutor to the sons of an Irish gentleman who was living near Teignmouth, John Synge, who was himself of the Powerscourt circle. So it was that the third Powerscourt meeting in 1833 found Muller and Craik

¹⁸ See n.9 above.

¹⁹ See n.9 above.

(now settled together in Bristol) present at Synge's invitation, together with Darby and Bellett of the original Irish group, and Newton (who had overcome his objections of the year before) and Hall from Plymouth. It was an occasion of surpassing interest. Like Newton, Craik and Muller appear to have attended with some diffidence: perhaps, in their case, because they felt that they should not leave the infant church at Bethesda chapel, barely one year old. In his diary, under date 16 September 1833, Craik wrote:

‘A letter arrived from Brother Synge, inviting us to visit Ireland, to attend a meeting at Lady Powerscourt's. This invitation brought us into perplexity, from which we got relief by casting upon the Lord, and uniting with the church at Bethesda in prayer. After we had prayed, the feeling of all was that we should go.’

It would be interesting to know how the Conference went on Tuesday 24th September, when the subjects discussed were :—‘Is the visible Christian Church founded on the basis of the Jewish? What is the nature of the ministry and ordinances of the former? Are the promises to either, or both, conditional?’²⁰

So the essential scene was set. How did those early Brethren reach their common futurist viewpoint? For Darby and the Dublin group, the futurist teaching already common there through the influence of de Burgh and J.H. Todd seems the obvious source. Newton attributes his rejection of the historicist scheme (which, incidentally, he calls ‘preterist’) to personal study of the Scriptures, while an unnamed book on Zechariah 12 to 14 gave him the key to his problems by hinting at a futurist fulfilment of those chapters.²¹ Müller was early awakened to the truth of the Advent, but the source of his adoption of a more detailed and futurist scheme is less clear. Of two other prominent leaders of the early Brethren we need speak only briefly. The saintly Robert Chapman seems to have kept well clear of prophetic disputing, as does the other outstanding saint of the early movement, Anthony Norris Groves. Chapman indeed, according to Newton, was some time before adopting millenarian ideas. Groves had left for Baghdad before the problems arose in serious form. In his journal he uses prophetic Scripture in that spirit of sweetness and light which was characteristically his—enjoying the hope of the Advent, and using the Scriptures as aids to simple devotion rather than by any hard and fast system of interpretation.

Before we trace the story further, it is necessary to break off here and pay due tribute to one notable feature of the group which was adopting these futurist principles, now thoroughly disseminated from Lacunza, through Irving, S. R. Maitland, de Burgh and others. Despite their ardent expectations of the Advent, they generally took care to avoid any fixing of dates or other sensational prophesying. The observation still holds good. It is a relief to turn from the

²⁰ See n.13 above.

²¹ Fromow, *Teachers of the Faith & Future*—B. W. Newton and S. P. Tregelles (1959), pp. 13-20.

exaggeration of historicist excitement at this time and to find oneself in the saner and more balanced atmosphere of the newly emerging movement. At Albury and in other contemporary expositors, the historicist school had written its own death warrant: the rampant date fixing and fantastic and conflicting interpretations of apocalyptic symbols brought their own nemesis. It may be that the leaders of the new thought themselves sometimes strayed (Darby indeed once attempted his hand at date fixing),²² but it was while they were feeling their way through to new interpretations, and their erring was trivial compared with the exponents of the older school. It is easy to sneer at futurism for its facile solution of the problems of Revelation, by removing to a future date, and away from the test of historical reality, the interpretations it puts forward—but when we understand just what historicism had done with the apocalyptic Scriptures, we realise that futurism at that juncture was but a simple and natural reaction of reasonable minds.

Yet, as every previous mode of interpretation down the years had eventually reached the point of disillusion and abandonment, so the new futurism contained within itself the seeds of its own destruction. Their presence was not long in appearing. Müller, Craik and Chapman might be able to hold their prophetic interpretations in the proper perspective of the whole body of Christian doctrine. We know from an explicit statement of his own in 1879 that Müller did not adopt the Secret Rapture viewpoint,²³ and we also know from later writing that both these points of view existed side by side at Bethesda and its daughter churches, and probably still exist, without ever seriously disturbing their Christian harmony.²⁴ The same applied at Barnstable, where Chapman and Hake enjoyed a remarkable harmony and intimacy although apparently differing on prophetic matters. Such forbearance did not always exist elsewhere. Too often prophetic interpretation became equated with basic orthodoxy, and assumed an importance out of all proportion to its real place in the scheme of Christian doctrine.

Before dealing with these differences, however, it is important to notice that in the later development of prophetic teachings in the evangelical section of the Church at large, we have one of our most striking measures of the wider influence of the early Brethren movement. Evangelicalism in general was by no means disposed to welcome the new teachings, particularly as they were identified on the one hand with the sensations of Irvingism, and on the other with J.H. Newman

²² H. St. John, *Analysis of the Gospel of Mark*, p. 142 (Quoting from Darby *Etudes sur l'Épître aux Hébreux*, Lausanne, c. 1835).

²³ Quoted by Mrs. Müller, *The Preaching Tours & Missionary Labours of George Müller*, 2nd edn., 1889, p. 141. A suggestion has been made that Müller changed his mind just before his death, but the late G.H. Lang undertook an exhaustive examination of the evidence and reached the conclusion that the statement rested on no good foundation. The examination is preserved in his private papers, now in the possession of Mr. G.C.D. Howley of Purley, Surrey [Ed.'s note: now in the Christian Brethren Archive, John Rylands University Library of Manchester].

²⁴ F.. K. Groves, *Conversations on Bethesda Family Matters* (1885), p.144.

and the Tractarians. Nor did Millenarianism fare any better, whether in its historicist or futurist variations Waldegrave's Bampton Lectures of 1853 were in fact specifically anti-millenarian, and may well have prevented a majority of evangelical Anglicans from adopting millennial views. Yet it is a fact that by the end of the century the Futurist and Millenarian views were dominant in a large section of evangelicalism, both in this country and in America. This can be attributed to a considerable extent to the influence of the Brethren, and is, whatever our opinion of the teachings themselves, a striking tribute to the influence of the Movement in its earlier days. Yet no teachings can make progress if the ground is not prepared, and these were successful because, to many Christians, the old historicism had been tried and found wanting, leaving them apparently with the stark choice between futurism and the arising rationalistic modernism.

To return, then, to the early Brethren movement. As with so much in those early days, the stage was held by two formidable men: Newton and Darby. Newton, the brilliant and austere scholar, inflexible in his views, and incapable of compromise: adamantly opposed to the Secret Rapture view, yet as adamantly futurist. Darby, warm hearted and impulsive, always ready to take the part of the under-dog, apt to jump half informed into violent partisanship, and with that one fatal weakness of intolerance of an equal: yet with his mind not yet made up. Then there was the church at Plymouth, scene of Newton's own labours, and object of an almost paternal interest to Darby, in only too much danger from the Irvingite excitement, just then reaching a crescendo. With Irvingism was popularity identified the Secret Rapture teaching. The result needs little imagination.

Newton devoted all his great talents to opposing this menace to the infant church, but the vigour of some of his views led to strife. Darby was sorely concerned over the differences, and then, somehow, a solution seemed to appear. Newton in his reminiscences, suggests that Darby arrived at the solution while away in Ireland, and immediately wrote to him, in the obvious hope that this would heal the breach. Some have suggested that the original idea was introduced by an unnamed Anglican at Powerscourt. We have already noticed the tendency at Albury to dispensationalise God's dealings with men, and we also know that Darby had, with his High Church background so filled with the concept of the Visible Church, reached his related conviction that the Church was ruined beyond repair: developing this into the doctrine that man had spoiled every previous form of God's methods with mankind. The next step was taken. Darby's solution was to project considerable sections of the New Testament away from the Church, as applicable only to a future dispensation of the restored Jewish remnant, which the Secret Rapture adherents envisaged. This would remove all the difficulties, and those Scriptures in the Gospels and elsewhere which presented such difficulty to

adherents of the new teaching were thus simply explained: they referred not to the Church at all, but to the future Jewish remnant.

The solution was too facile. If Darby had hoped for Newton's glad acceptance he was sorely disappointed. Newton saw its weakness at once:—

‘At last Darby wrote from Cork, saying he had discovered a method of reconciling the whole dispute, and would tell me when he came. When he did, it turned out to be the “Jewish Interpretation”. The Gospel of Matthew was not teaching Church Truth but Kingdom Truth, and so on. He explained it to me and I said “Darby, if you admit that distinction you virtually give up Christianity.” Well, they kept on at that until they worked out the result as we know it. The Secret Rapture was bad enough, but this was worse.’²⁵

The damage was indeed done, and for a moment dispensationalising ran riot, as Tregelles has explained in his accounts of those times. But worse resulted, for Darby, finding his teachings challenged, reacted by vigorous attacks on Newton's position, until a form of pamphlet war developed. Remorselessly the rift widened, to issue in the tragic division at Plymouth in 1845 and the still more tragic sequel. Prophetic excitement had done its worst: and although the division when it came was ostensibly on other points—as indeed was the division between Darby and Müller which so quickly followed—the feeling of a decade of often violent controversy had done its worst. ‘Had Newton accorded with Mr. Darby on Prophecy’ wrote Tregelles, ‘we should never have heard *his* voice raised against him as to Ministry or Church Order; his writings would not have been scrutinised with severity, in order to glean matters of accusation.’²⁶

There is little further to add. The tremendous personality of Darby, backed by the immense learning of his disciple William Kelly, sufficed to impress his variation of futurism upon a large portion of evangelicalism: a process vastly forwarded by the adoption of his scheme in the Scofield reference Bible. Conversely, Newton's views were for a time overshadowed by the allegations of heresy made against him by the followers of Darby: the effect of which, even the association of a name such as that of George Müller with similar prophetic views did not outweigh. From time to time other variations of futurism have appeared among Brethren and it is well therefore to make one important point. Wherever prophetic teachings have begun to develop any form of unbalanced emphasis, their proponents have not found a welcome lodging place among Brethren. Even among the dispensationalist wing has this been so: happily, the Darbyite leaders were men of a soundly based theology, and in general refrained after the first wild

²⁵ See n.9 above.

²⁶ S.P. Tregelles *Three Letters* (1849) 1894 edn., p. 71, and *Pastoral Relations* (1862) Pt. II., pp 39-41 n.

abandon, from carrying the theory to its logical conclusions. The established dispensationalism of the early Darbyite leaders has proved to be mild and comparatively innocuous. The teaching was never universal among Brethren, and influential leaders from the first have been opposed to it: as is demonstrated by the fact that Bernard's Bampton Lectures on *The Progress of Doctrine in the New Testament* have been accepted Brethren reading, and were in fact reprinted in an abridged form by a Brethren publishing house. The chief harm of the teaching has been negative, in hindering a full appreciation of the unity of Divine Revelation, and at times in encouraging antinomian tendencies, but the teaching is essential neither to the movement nor to its ideals. It has been left to circles outside the Brethren, notably those connected with Dr. Bullinger, to develop this method of dividing Scriptures to a fuller extent.²⁷

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So it remains to complete our study with a few practical reflections arising from the history which we have traversed. Let me make them in the form of a number of propositions.

1. It is apparent that no one system of prophetic interpretation has yet drawn even within sight of satisfying all godly expositors. In such matters, therefore, the utmost humility and forbearance is incumbent upon us, as is also the utmost freedom of belief.
2. We might well distinguish more carefully the subjective and the objective aspects of prophecy. It is apparent that interpretations which to us appear to have been proved incorrect by the passage of time, have nevertheless been used powerfully for good among the people of God. This raises a further interesting question. Might those interpretations have been right for those Christians, after all, though wrong for us? We reach here a point where the finite touches the infinite: the temporal the timeless. Why should we expect that the reality will necessarily be comprehensible to us?
3. Let us note some of the numerous fallacies which are inherent in prophetic disputation, and shun them like the plague
 - (a) It is dangerous to resort to the use of facile classification and nicknames. Prophetic ideas are so mixed, that if we do, we can hardly avoid misrepresenting our fellow Christians.
 - (b) We do not dispose of any theory by linking it with some 'suspect' source, whether papal, Irvingite, Jesuit or any other. In fact, there is probably not one theory which has not so been linked, at some time in its

²⁷ Readers are also referred in connection with this paper generally to G.E. Ladd, *The Blessed Hope* (1956).

history. Perhaps in no other branch of theology do so many beams lodge in so many eyes!

- (c) It is not permissible to extend our opponent's arguments to produce heresies which he would disclaim: for example, to suggest that the 'Partial Rapture' theory imperils the Atonement, or that the 'Secret Rapture' idea necessarily produces an exaggerated dispensationalism, or that a-millennialism is a form of 'new modernism', or the post-tribulation belief a mark of lack of affection for the Lord. The most that is permissible is to indicate whither a theory might lead, in our view, if it is not carefully guarded.

4. Above all, we must not allow our prophetic systems to shape our theology. We have already seen how nearly the Darbyite section of the Brethren came to grief on this very point, but a more pertinent example is to hand. For it was in an attempt to salvage the old historicist premillennialism that the Seventh Day Adventist movement developed those strange ideas on the Atonement which, even more than some of their other tenets, have parted the immense energies of that movement from the true stream of evangelical life.

So we reach the end of this paper. Is it inappropriate if we close by turning our eyes once more to the glorious truth of the ultimate Triumph and Advent of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ? That fact is the hope of all schools of thought, and in the light of it, how petty do quarrels over its time and manner become! Let us close by quoting the great 16th century Reformer, Heinrich Bullinger :—

'I am of the opinion that I do not see any reason to quarrel with brethren in the faith, or even to sever the ties of friendship, if they differ in the explanation of certain passages, as long as we are united in the Doctrines of faith. I have written about the New Testament and the Revelation, but if others write also about it and offer better and more simple explanations to the church, I shall be very grateful and shall never stick obstinately to my writings.'

And again he writes:—

'At the second time He shall come gloriously to judgment, to be a judge and revenger that will not be entreated against all unrepentant sinners and wicked doers. And He shall come out of heaven, from the right hand of the Father, in His visible and very human body, to be seen of all flesh, with the incomprehensible power of His Godhead, and being attended on by all the angels.'

'Even so, come, Lord Jesus.'