Gribben, Crawford. *J. N. Darby and the Roots of Dispensationalism*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2024. 154pp. + 16pp. (front matter) + 94pp. (back matter).

Crawford Gribben, a professor at Queen's University Belfast, pairs an intriguing interest in John Owen and John Nelson Darby, in the Puritans and the Plymouth Brethren. This volume is a major study in Darby's thought. The latter part of the title is explained in the last sentence of the book: "He saw the roots, but not the birth, of dispensationalism." Dispensationalism, in Gribben's telling, is a simplification and distortion of Darby's thought. The focus of the book is about Darby's soteriology, ecclesiology, pneumatology, and eschatology. Gribben summarizes Darby's positions as Calvinist, catholic, charismatic, and catastrophic, respectively. These designations need some unpacking, however, since Darby's views include some surprises.

Gribben describes Darby's soteriology as developing out of "Anglican high Calvinism" (35). However, this brand of Calvinism is different from what many today would think of as flying under the Calvinist banner. For instance, Gribben observes, "Like other high Calvinists, he rejected the confessional view that believers were under the moral law as a rule of life in their sanctification" (36). One might think that this was a kind of antinomian hyper-Calvinism, but the Brethren recognized the Scriptures as morally binding and held that the imitation of Christ is a higher standard than the Decalogue (144, 146). This emphasis led Darby to argue against justification on the grounds of Christ's imputed righteousness. He wanted to excise any thought that righteousness could come through obedience to the law—even Christ's obedience to the law. In this Darby claimed that he was closer to the Augsburg Confession, the Formula of Concord, Calvin's *Institutes*, the Thirty-Nine Articles, and the Westminster Confession than his opponents. Darby thought that this "was his most important contribution" to the recovery of true theology (52). Darby's soteriology, not his eschatology, provoked the most opposition in Darby's own day. Gribben highlights especially the opposition of Free Church of Scotland minister George Smeaton, whom, Gribben asserts, misunderstood some of Darby's claims. Gribben also notes that Darby's soteriology did not persist even among the Brethren.

Gribben describes Darby's ecclesiology as "catholic" (32). This may seem an odd appellation to apply to the leader of a group that called for separation from denominations that contained a mixture of believers and unbelievers. In Darby's thought, however, the church had fallen away from its purity in the first centuries and would never be restored (the Reformation did not restore it, according to Darby). Thus, the Brethren called all true Christians to gather apart from the denominations. Much of the chapter on ecclesiology outlines the practical challenges the Brethren faced in trying to live out this theology, including a split among the Brethren themselves.

Darby's pneumatology was, as Gribben puts it, "laundered charismaticism" (91). Darby rejected cessationism, but he also believed that Irving and his followers were not truly receiving special gifting from the Spirit. Later he would deny that the miraculous gifts continued even while rejecting the cessationist position: "The gifts had been withdrawn not because the canon of Scripture had been completed, as nineteenth-century cessationists routinely argued, but because of the church's failure" (97). Darby also developed a two-stage view of the Christian life in which the sealing of the Spirit was a subsequent experience, but he rejected Wesleyan perfectionism and thought the Higher Life

movement was a distortion of his doctrine. He also innovated by distinguishing between definitive and progressive sanctification. According to Gribben, this distinction was later picked up by Westminster Seminary professor John Murray. Gribben also claims that D. Martyn-Lloyd Jones adopted Darby's view that the sealing of the Spirit was a subsequent experience in the Christian life. Interestingly, later dispensationalists did little with Darby's pneumatology: "Hardly anything of Darby's pneumatology made it into the *Scofield Reference Bible* (1909)" (91).

Darby's eschatology was, in his lifetime, the least controversial aspect of his theology due to the wide variety of eschatological positions among evangelicals in the nineteenth century. In addition, Darby was not entirely innovative. Gribben notes that "Darby combined existing eschatological ideas in a distinctive structure" (116). These factors explain why Darby's eschatology was widely adopted in a variety of denominations where his other theological views would not have been welcome. In his examination of Darby's eschatology, Gribben draws three contrasts between Darby's eschatology and that of dispensationalists who followed him. First, Darby did not base his eschatology upon a literal reading of the prophets. Instead, Darby examined whether a prophetic passage referred to Israel or to the church and then developed his interpretative approach from that starting point. Second, even though Darby believed that Jews would return to the land of Israel and be converted, Gribben thinks it inaccurate to label Darby a Zionist. Gribben notes that Darby had "high Tory sensibilities" that led him to be "opposed to popular democracy" (117). This combined with his belief that the church should avoid political campaigns. Thus, Darby's belief regarding the restoration of Israel had no political component to it. Third, Darby's understanding of dispensations differed from the definitions of later dispensations. He moved away from using *dispensation* to describe "a period in redemptive history," opting to use the terminology of "age" or "administration" (133). He used the term *dispensation* "to refer to a particular expression of divine grace within these redemptive-historical periods" (133). In addition, dispensations only existed in the time when God was specially working among the Jews. Thus, for Darby there were no dispensations before the Flood or after the Cross. The sharp distinction between Israel and the church led to another innovation that did not endure. Darby argued that the material promises of the OT would be fulfilled for Israel on the new earth while the spiritual promises given to the church would be fulfilled for the church in heaven.

Gribben opens his book by citing Donald Akenson's claim that Darby is the fourth most influential Protestant theologian, following only Luther, Calvin, and Wesley. He emphasizes the scope of Darby's writing ("one of the nineteenth century's most prolific and varied writers," 3) and his vast learning (noting his extensive library, positive reviews of his *Synopsis* in the *Princeton Review,* his work with Bible translations in German, French, and English, and his engagement with textual criticism). Despite impressions, sometimes fostered by the Brethren themselves, that Darby was an innovator, Gribben holds that Darby was historically informed. He concludes, ""But if the substance of his ideas was not especially distinctive, his combination of ideas was often unique" (x). And yet for all his learning and writing, Gribben finds Darby's thought neglected, overshadowed by the dispensationalism that followed him.

Gribben closes the book by drawing on evaluations of early critics and defenders of Darby and the Brethren. While acknowledging Darby's distinctive thought, Gribben seems to side with those who

find greater continuity between Darby and the broader Reformed tradition. For instance, Gribben writes of a critic of Darby (146–47):

> He might have discovered in the works of Johannes Piscator Darby's argument that believers were not justified through the imputation of the righteousness of Christ; he might have learned from John Owen Darby's argument that believers should meet for Bible study without clerical oversight and for the weekly celebration of the Lord's Supper; he might have found in the works of Johannes Cocceius the idea that redemptive history progressed through a sequences of ages, as a consequence of which believers were not bound to keep the Lord's Day as the Christian Sabbath; and he might have located the idea that Jewish people would be converted to Christianity and restored to the Promised Land in the Geneva Bible and in the works of many English puritans. In other words, just as Reformed tradition could be used to critique the distinctive claims of the brethren, so it could be used to support them.

Early dispensationalism, on the other hand, Gribben takes to be something that Darby intensely disliked: a "simplified and reductive" rendering of his thought. These modifications have taken some odd turns (Gribben mentions Clarence Larkin, Hal Lindsey, and the *Left Behind* series). Gribben sees progressive dispensationalism as a move back toward Reformed theology (though not necessarily a move back to Darby).

Gribben has written a fascinating account of the thought of a clearly influential figure. The major shortcoming of the book is its brevity. For instance, the soteriology chapter clearly explains why Darby rejected the imputation of Christ's righteousness, but his alternative scheme is not clearly explained. Gribben writes as an historian. He is not evaluating Darby's views. One might feel some regret in reading Gribben's account that Darby's complex thought was simplified or abandoned. But when evaluated theologically, Darby's view of imputation, his view of the church, his views on the sealing of the Spirit, and his distinctive definition of *dispensation* all should have been abandoned. In the almost century and a half since Darby's death, his best ideas (such as the distinction between definitive and progressive sanctification and some of his eschatological thought) have endured, while the less valuable ideas have fallen away.

Finally, Gribben's work stands as a caution to contemporary critics of dispensationalism. It will not do to simply critique Darby and Scofield and think that dispensationalism has been discredited. Dispensationalism is a developing theological tradition. Many critiques of Darby and Scofield do not apply to present-day dispensationalists, especially progressive dispensationalists. Gribben's observation that Darby was often drawing on earlier theological ideas should move some Reformed theologians to examine whether some of the opposition to dispensationalist positions is too reactive. The restoration of Israel to the land and a national conversion has a long Reformed pedigree. Must it be abandoned simply because it was also adopted by Darby and the dispensationalists who followed him?

Brian C. Collins
Biblical Worldview Lead Specialist | BJU Press