

Foreword

“PREMILLENNIALISM,” ACCORDING TO DAVID BROWN, “is no barren speculation—useless though true, and innocuous though false.” Brown, the most capable critic of premillennial teaching in the mid-nineteenth century, was recognizing its power. This form of prophetic theorizing, he went on, virtually constructs “a whole world of its own.”¹ What might seem to subsequent generations an obscurantist preoccupation was in the mid-nineteenth century an enormously influential way of thinking that colored all the opinions of its advocates and molded their priorities for action. Premillennialists upheld the view that the second coming of Christ was to be expected before a millennium of peace and prosperity on earth. The specific form of premillennialism that was dominant in the early Victorian years has been labelled “historicist” because it held that the book of Revelation predicted the historical events of the Christian era. Historicist premillennialism is the subject of this book.

The phenomenon is diagnosed as an expression of Romanticism in religion. The early nineteenth century was marked by the spread of views associated with the Romantic revolution in values that challenged the intellectual hegemony of the Enlightenment. The blending of Romantic taste with Evangelicalism generated historicist premillennialism. Evangelicals swayed by the Enlightenment had commonly adopted a postmillennial view of the future. The second coming, on this view, would not take place until after the millennium. Postmillennialists looked soberly at the course of world events, supposing the Almighty operated by regular methods, so that nothing unusual, nothing beyond the bounds of “enlightened Christian sagacity,” was to be expected in the near future. But others, touched by the Romantic temper, were inspired (Brown wrote) by “the force of intuitive perception” so that when they encountered the historicist premillennial

1. David Brown, *Christ's Second Coming: Will It Be Premillennial?* 3rd edn (Edinburgh: Johnstone & Hunter, 1853), 8.

perspective “they *feel*—they *know* it to be true.”² Such ardent souls took a passionate interest in time, looking around them for confirmation of their paradigm. They became dedicated students of prophecy.

The historicists should not, however, be confused with futurist premillennialists. Futurists, so-called because they believed that the bulk of scriptural prophecies were to be fulfilled in the future, existed in the early Victorian period, but at the time in much smaller numbers. Their chief exponent, J. N. Darby, invented the system of dispensationalism that the historicists rejected. But in later years dispensationalists were to outpace their rivals and their scheme became immensely influential among Fundamentalists. It is a central contention here that historians have previously underestimated the difference between historicists and dispensationalists, so attributing something of the backward-looking, world-rejecting stance of Darby’s followers to the mid-nineteenth-century premillennialists. Far from being arch-conservatives, the historicists held broad views showing affinities with those of contemporary liberal theologians, actually looking at the prospects of the world with as much optimism as their secular contemporaries who embraced the idea of progress. Historicist premillennialists were part of the theological and intellectual mainstream.

One among their number was Lord Shaftesbury. This Evangelical peer has often been celebrated for his leadership of the campaign for the restriction of factory working hours and for his championship of other measures of social reform. There has appeared to be a conundrum in that a man who wanted to make the world a better place was also somebody who dismissed the world. This book resolves the problem. As a historicist premillennialist, Shaftesbury accepted the importance of the incarnation and so appreciated the needs of the human body. He was therefore committed to the improvement of the physical environment. These beliefs, far from clashing, formed a coherent whole. Others in the school of thought joined Shaftesbury in taking organized action to improve the human lot, believing more than their Evangelical predecessors in the influence of the environment over human behavior. His contemporaries, in fact, anticipated some of the policies of a later social gospel generation, showing distinctively progressive characteristics.

Martin Spence has identified a hole at the center of studies of the Evangelical movement. Nobody before him has made a sustained

2. Ibid., 10.

academic investigation of historicist premillennialism. He has absorbed a body of literature that has been almost entirely neglected by historians. Engaging with previous commentators on the period, he shows persuasively that his subjects were scholarly rather than populist and aligned with their contemporaries in Victorian society rather than perennially pitted against them. He demonstrates that Evangelicalism changed over time, embracing in the middle of the nineteenth century an estimate of the future that has much in common with views of twenty-first-century Evangelical commentators such as N. T. Wright who see eschatological fulfilment as earthly rather than heavenly. Martin has not only seen a hole: he has filled it.

David W. Bebbington

University of Stirling, July 2014