

## Donald Harman Akenson, *The Americanization of the Apocalypse: Creating America's Own Bible*

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In 1909 Oxford University Press published the *Scofield Reference Bible*, which is probably the best-selling book in the press's history. In addition to the King James text, the volume included Cyrus Ingerson Scofield's introduction to each book of the Bible and clarifying notes on the biblical text. Scofield's commentary pushed readers to understand the Bible through a relatively new and somewhat obscure theological framework called premillennial dispensationalism.

Across 500 pages Donald Harman Akenson seeks to explain the deep and complicated transnational history that led to the production of this book. His smart and engaging *The Americanization of the Apocalypse: Creating America's Own Bible* is the third and final instalment in a three-volume series in which he traces the Plymouth Brethren's creation of 'a radically new form of Christianity', which took root in the early nineteenth century among Dublin's Anglo-Irish aristocracy and then migrated to England, and then to Canada and finally to the United States (p. 2). 'It is possible to argue', Akenson contends, 'that effectively the Brethren created an entirely new set of scriptures, so radical was their re-compiling and re-interpreting of the ancient texts' (p. 4).

Akenson's goal in part is to challenge and correct historians who he believes have overlooked the complexity, significance and transnational power of dispensationalism in their haste to explain the subsequent rise of fundamentalism. Historians including Ernest Sandeen and George Marsden, he claims,

shared a teleology that we should try to escape, at least temporarily. We need to respect on its own terms the narrative of the first eighty or ninety years of dispensationally inflected doctrines, and especially the transnational intermixture of ideas and agency that brought them to their polished popular form in early twentieth-century America (p. 432).

Instead, Akenson's three books show a 'nineteenth-century process as having an integrity of its own and a significance that is not dependent upon later twentieth-century pyrotechnics' (p. 433). For Akenson, fundamentalism is the epilogue on a rich and complex history but not the justification for narrating the story of dispensationalism, which stands on its own.

To tell this history, Akenson lets no facts escape unnoticed. 'We have looked into detail-after-particular-detail', he explains, 'because simply asserting that world-forming ideas moved across oceans is not sufficient. Individual agency, and hence, individual biography, counts'. He highlights the stories of the individuals who served 'as vectors in the transport of ideas' (p. 362). The most effective and influential was John Nelson Darby, who 'in the physical itinerary of his missionary travels in North America established an informal and unofficial set of boundaries that fit where the great evangelical upsurge in late nineteenth-century apocalyptic evangelicalism in North America found its home soil' (p. 120).

In the United States, the growth of the dispensational movement began slowly. Then, seemingly unexpectedly, American evangelical apocalypticism emerged in the second half of the 1870s with a demotic effulgence so striking that newspaper editors sometimes put the phenomenon on their front pages: ‘the several variants of the any-moment Rapture that, like a rain of white-hot shrapnel, flashed and fell upon the everyday religious life of so very many American Protestants in the last quarter of the nineteenth century’ (p. 188). Yet as Americans embraced dispensationalism, the movement lost some of its intellectual lustre. ‘Whereas in the 1830s one could assume among the leading Brethren both Latin and classical Greek, and usually biblical Hebrew, plus worldly French, for their late nineteenth-century heirs in North America, the English language was assumed to be quite enough’ (p. 339).

Akenson concludes his book with a multi-chapter, in-depth examination of the work and influence of Scofield and his reference Bible. He asks readers to recognise ‘fully what a grand-chance lottery was the creation of the *Scofield Reference Bible*’ (p. 362). Not only was Cyrus Scofield himself – ‘the fast-tracking pastor from Dallas...who had been an unsuccessful mid-American confidence man’ (p. 335) – ‘a mightily unlikely person to carry out such a monumental work’ (p. 362), but the stakes for Oxford University Press’s new North American division were enormous: ‘it was not just about a reference Bible’, Akenson writes, ‘but actually an assertive new set of scriptures’ (p. 401). The book itself transformed how readers understood the holy text.

*The frame took precedence over the text...* Once a Bible student engaged the Scofield system, an innocent reading of the scriptural text was forever impossible – the new knowledge, if such it was, could be overwritten by later study, but it remained as a mental palimpsest, shading onto later study at unpredictable intervals (p. 411).

Akenson has done historians of Anglo-American Protestantism a great service in excavating in encyclopaedic detail the origins of dispensationalist premillennialism. He is right to find early premillennialism, its expression in dispensationalism and its popularisation through the *Scofield Reference Bible* intriguing in their own right rather than see them just as early foundations upon which the leaders of fundamentalism and then the religious right built. ‘Looking at 1909’, he writes, we would have expected that dispensationalism ‘most likely would have been just another of the scores of New World cottage faiths made up of decent folk, led, almost always, by men whose store-bought suits never quite fit them’ (pp. 433–4).

But that is not what happened. Two world wars and a global economic depression supercharged the movement, helping move it to the centre of American fundamentalism. Had that not happened, had dispensationalism remained just one ‘cottage faith’ among many, it is hard to imagine Oxford University Press greenlighting publication of Akenson’s books. As much as Akenson wants us to set aside what happened after 1909 to appreciate what happened before it, it is only what happened after that justifies the level of attention Akenson gives the dispensational movement. And I am glad he did. *The Americanization of the Apocalypse* is a deeply researched, compelling, and wonderful book that tells an important story. Along with Daniel Hummel’s *The Rise and Fall of Dispensationalism: How the Evangelical Battle over the End Times Shaped a Nation* and Brenden Pietsch’s *Dispensational Modernism*, it will be essential reading for scholars of American religion for years to come.