



Max S. Weremchuk

BECOMING
"J.N.D."

The Early Years of
John Nelson Darby: 1800-1829

PREFACE

Early writers among the Plymouth Brethren tended to sign their publications with their initials only. The thought behind this habit was that the message, if it contained divine truth, was of much more importance than the mere human author used to convey it and who should remain in the background. Or as John Nelson Darby expressed it: “I never liked putting ‘the author’ in any tract of mine, feeling there was no good in anything God was not the author of.”¹ When his friend William Kelly republished some of Darby’s earlier works, Darby was somewhat taken aback upon seeing the volume in question, writing: “It is the title page only that frightens me. It has a kind of pretentious look, making a kind of author of me who attaches himself to his works and his works to himself, which is not really the case. ... I do not know if it could be remedied now, and another title given – ‘a collection of tracts and papers, some out of print or never published, by J.N.D.,’ or some such thing.”² It is ironic that at the time of his letter to Kelly in 1867 the initials “J.N.D.” had already become famous, a fame which has continued onto this day.

The first reaction of most people who are acquainted with the name “John Nelson Darby” is to associate it with terms such as the “rapture” or “dispensationalism” when they hear it. This is not surprising as Darby has often been called the “father of modern dispensationalism,” and a “prophetic pioneer.” This book, however, is not primarily concerned with those appellations.³ Instead, it concentrates on the time before prophecy began to

¹ J. N. Darby, *Letters of J. N. D.* (Lancing, Sussex: Kingston Bible Trust n. d.), 3:390. Quite the opposite of conventions in our day where often the author’s name on a book cover eclipses in size and prominence the title of the volume.

² *Ibid.*, 389–390.

³ For an examination of Darby’s contribution to the subject of prophecy see my chapter, “John Nelson Darby (1800–1882),” in James I. Fazio and Cory M. Marsh, eds., *Discovering Dispensationalism: Tracing the Development of Dispensational Thought from the First to the Twenty-First Century* (El Cajon: SCS Press, 2023). It is also good to keep in mind what William Kelly wrote in the margin that challenge’s William Neatby’s comment, “Darby made the study

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play a major role in Darby’s life. It is about his early, formative years. In this volume I attempt to give the reader a glimpse of the man before he became famous, before his initials could not hide who he was. Not an easy task, as little exists from his young adulthood. Not much firsthand information, that is. Many of Darby’s contemporaries who shared the same environments, be it in England or Ireland, at school or within the ministry of the Church, wrote of their times and experiences. Happily, much of it has increasingly become accessible through digitization and the internet than was the case in the past. I have resorted to making use of these contemporary sources as much as possible in an effort to gain an understanding of the world in which Darby lived and of which he was a part.⁴ In the main I let these authors from the past speak for themselves, without paraphrasing what they wrote or said. Of course, looking back from our vantage point in time has certain advantages. We are perhaps better able to assess certain movements, events, motives, and ideas. We can see more interconnections and influences, ones that were unapparent to the persons with whom we are dealing. Distance creates a degree of objectivity; we are not as involved, especially not emotionally involved, as the “actors” were then. But this, perhaps unconscious, attitude of superiority can also be very misleading. It can mislead us to think we know what we are talking about when in reality we do not. I prefer the approach advocated by Ernst-Wilhelm Kohls:

of prophecy the pivot of his work” in his *A History of the Plymouth Brethren*: “J.N. Darby on the contrary & unequivocally gave his heart’s first allegiance to grace in Christ for the Christian & the church far above prophecy.” William Neatby, *A History of the Plymouth Brethren* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1901), 81 https://www.brethrenarchive.org/media/366426/kelly-w-_-annotations-in-neatby-history-of-the-brethren.pdf.

⁴ Beginning with chapter 7 of the present volume, *A New Direction*, more direct sources for Darby’s biography and his reaction to events taking place around him become available. It was at that point in his life where he fully entered adulthood and the available material demonstrates how important this time period was in shaping him to become the man who would one day lastingly change how many people view the Bible, the Church, Israel, and the future.

The historical, philosophical and theological statements themselves want to be heard unabbreviated, and what an author viewed as self-evident is more important than the opinion and interpretation and methodology of later critics. It is only when the interpreter takes this into consideration that events or texts from the past can become fully present and newly operative in a causal sense rarely imagined previously.⁵

Times have changed considerably and not everyone is acquainted with the world of the 19th century in the same measure. For this reason, wherever possible, I have attempted to explain antiquated terms, events, and so on which may be unfamiliar. Similarly, much of my research stems from aged European periodicals that either no longer exist or do not conform to modern conventionalities in regard to explicit dating, city of publication, article titles, volume numbers, etc. In such cases, I have cited them as thoroughly as I am able, but, given their antiquation, some allowances must be made. Though explanations of dated terms and sources in the book may appear tedious, and admittedly somewhat superficial, for persons more at home in the material, I do hope they can prove useful to the majority of readers.

It is interesting to note what Darby himself thought of biographies and their appeal:

The public, no doubt, likes confidences, likes secret histories, [...] It is admitted behind the scenes in an interesting epoch, and has the actors familiarly and confidingly brought before it. This, of course, attracts. We

⁵ “Die historischen, philosophischen und theologischen Aussagen selbst wollen unverkürzt zu Worte kommen, und das Selbstverständnis eines Autors ist wichtiger als die Auffassung und Deutung und Methodik späterer Beurteiler. Erst wenn das vom Interpreten beachtet wird, können Geschehnisse oder Texte der Vergangenheit in bislang kaum geahnter Weise voll gegenwärtig und im ursächlichen Sinne neu wirksam werden.” Ernst-Wilhelm Kohls, *Vorwärts zu den Tatsachen. Zur Überwindung der heutigen Hermeneutik seit Schleiermacher, Dilthey, Harnack und Troeltsch* (Basel: F. Reinhardt, 1981), 17, quoted in Rolf-Edgar Gerlach, *Carl Brockhaus: Ein Leben für Gott und die Brüder* (Wuppertal: R. Brockhaus, 1994), 6.

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like to be thus trusted with secrets, to know what has gone on.⁶

While it is my hope that this volume can in some small way contribute to our knowing “what has gone on,” it is not in any way meant to reveal sensational secrets in the sense of a cheap scandal tabloid, but rather serve to gain a better appreciation and understanding of the man and his times. It tells the story of how he came to be what he became. An occupation with this early period in Darby’s long life may lead to a better understanding of his later life.

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⁶ J. N. Darby, *Collected Writings of J. N. Darby* (Kingston Bible Trust: Lancing, Sussex), 18:149.

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The present volume attempts a more scholarly or academic approach to its subject than my previous volume *John Nelson Darby* (SCS Press, 2021). If it meets the demands of professional historians, others must judge.

A study of Darby’s life can be carried out on a, for want of a better word, secular level. That is, viewing all he did, said or taught as being simply the outgrowth of the workings of his own mind in combination with chance events and random conditions and not the result of any divine influence or intervention. But to do so would in a sense be like writing about Egypt and never taking the importance and influence of the Nile into consideration. It is not the purpose of this biography to determine what in Darby’s life was the result of his own, subjective apprehension of things and simply the result of given circumstances and how much was actual divine influence, if any. That being said, if there *was* a divine influence in Darby’s life, would not ignoring it (or explaining it away) in favour of “cold, hard facts” be missing something essential? Would not eliminating (to a certain extent) the divine “factor” eliminate one of the necessary “facts” needed to complete the picture? Without pretending to know just what, when, where and how much was of a divine working in Darby’s life, room must be left for the possibility of it having been a determining factor in some instances at least.

I feel that Devin Brown in his biography of C. S. Lewis brings it to the point when he writes:

If a biographer does not believe it is possible to have an authentic faith in God—because there is no God—then he must provide an alternative account of this *so-called* faith and its loss....there is a type of biography that takes the details Lewis gives us about his life and, using a secular lens, claims to be able to see through them to what really lies behind them in a way Lewis himself could not. There is a type of biography that sees this practice as its proper function and purpose.

This is not that type of biography.¹⁴

¹⁴ Devin Brown, *A Life Observed, A Spiritual Biography of C. S. Lewis* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2013), 69–70.

Neither is the present one and what Brown writes applies to Darby just as much as to Lewis. Categorically leaving God and faith, as valid factors, out of the equation when dealing with Darby's life can only lead to results based on misconceptions and erroneous assumptions that are then incorrectly presented as "facts."

J. R. R. Tolkien wrote of his friend C. S. Lewis: "Still I wish it could be forbidden that after a great man is dead, little men should scribble over him, who have not and must know they have not sufficient knowledge of his life and character to give them any key to the truth."¹⁵

Though I readily admit to being a "little man" and deficient in my knowledge it is nevertheless my hope that the present work is not just a scribbling over Darby, but rather helps the reader to gain some knowledge of his life and character and that the reader will find Darby and his times, the people he knew or were involved with him (in varying degrees), to be as fascinating as I have during my research and the compilation of this volume.

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¹⁵ J. R. R. Tolkien, *The Letters of J. R. R. Tolkien*, ed. Humphrey Carpenter and Christopher Tolkien (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1981), 350–351.