

# John Nelson Darby, the Scofield Reference Bible, and the rise of old-earth creationism

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The gap theory, which postulates a gap of unknown length between the first two verses of Genesis, was popularized in evangelical circles in the 19<sup>th</sup> century through John Nelson Darby's teaching and writing, and in the writing of George Hawkins Pember (1876), and then in the text-notes of Cyrus Ingerson Scofield's Reference Bible (1909 and 1917). The gap theory had been developed initially by Thomas Chalmers (1804 and 1814) in response to a growing belief in an old Earth, for example in James Hutton's writing in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century. It was supported by Charles Goodwin's contribution to the liberal and critical anthology *Essays and Reviews* (1860). This accommodation to secular geology spread through many conservative evangelical congregations, although Darby and Scofield strongly resisted belief in evolution, especially of man.

The influence of John Nelson Darby (1800–1882), and the Scofield Reference Bible (1909, 1917), led many members of the Plymouth Brethren movement to adopt belief in old-earth creation, as opposed to young-earth creation, or theistic evolution. The preferred old-earth view was the gap theory, with less willingness to accept belief in pre-Adamic races, or the day-age position. The gap theory (sometimes referred to as the ruin/reconstruction theory) had been expounded by Thomas Chalmers as early as 1804 (at the age of 24) and published in 1814.<sup>1</sup> Chalmers' claims followed James Hutton's promotion of an old Earth in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, and attempts to trace Chalmers' belief to earlier times are not strongly supported.<sup>2</sup> Chalmers wrote as follows:

“The beginning spoken of here has been variously estimated. My own opinion, as published in 1814, is that it forms no part of the first day but refers to a period of indefinite antiquity when God created the worlds out of nothing. The commencement of the first day's work I hold to be the moving of God's Spirit upon the face of the waters. We can allow geology the amplest time for its various revolutions without infringing even on the literalities of the Mosaic record—while Nature herself bears witness to the need of a creative interposition ... .”<sup>3</sup>

The Plymouth Brethren movement began in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century at a time when British geologists had moved to accept belief in deep time. Leaders of the Brethren movement included the Church of Ireland minister John Nelson Darby (figure 1), as well as other Anglican and Catholic clerics from Britain and Ireland, and the Lutheran minister George Müller from Germany. These were men who had a desire to pursue Christian faith without the formality of traditional religion. There was also a strong interest in end-time prophecy within the movement, and a particular dispensationalist approach to the reading of Scripture among many members.<sup>4</sup> A dispensation of grace can be thought of as “a period of time

during which man is tested in respect of obedience to some specific revelation of the will of God.”<sup>5</sup>

John Nelson Darby was very industrious in his writing, and his influence was (and is) huge in terms of dispensationalism, although not always recognized.<sup>6</sup> However, despite affinity for the gap theory, within the movement there were still some notable characters who were committed to a young Earth, such as Philip Henry Gosse in his work *Omphalos* (1857). Gosse argued that miracles may lead to an apparent age, such as when Jesus turned water into wine. Unfortunately, he over-extended the argument to suggest that Adam must have had a naval, and that fossils may have been deliberately planted in the ground to give a history that never existed in reality.

The Brethren movement grew enthusiastically, but later divided into the Open Brethren and Exclusive Brethren. The movement has produced a disproportionate number of academics over the years in relation to their numbers, perhaps because of connections in Victorian society, and a commitment to studying the biblical text as well as the natural world. It may be noted that modern proponents of old-earth creation in the UK, with links to the Plymouth Brethren movement, include well-regarded Christian leaders, such as John Lennox,<sup>7</sup> Alister Noble,<sup>8</sup> and Roger Forster.<sup>9</sup> These leaders are sympathetic to Intelligent Design, but have at times been critical of the young-earth position, partly for its alleged novelty (erroneously claimed) within Christian tradition.<sup>10</sup>

Darby's position with regards to the creation account was popularized through the text notes of the Scofield Reference Bible, first published in 1909 by Cyrus Ingerson Scofield (figure 2), which advocated for an old Earth. The second, more influential and widely available, ‘new and improved’ edition, which is discussed here, was first published in 1917. He advanced the gap theory in the marginal note of Genesis 1:2 (discussed below) (figure 3).

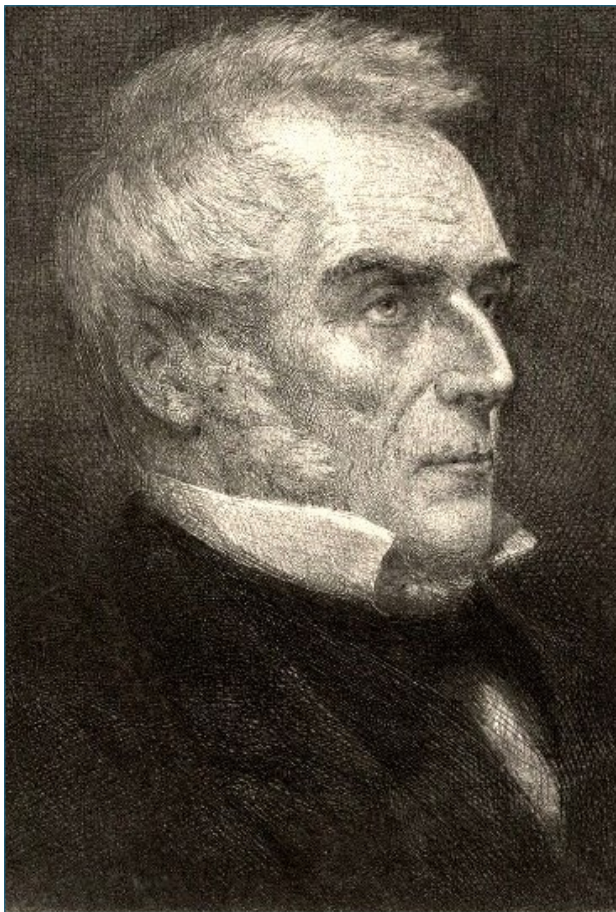


Figure 1. John Nelson Darby (1800–1882)

### John Nelson Darby (1800–1882)

John Nelson Darby was a prolific writer and influential Christian leader, but argued for the gap theory in a number of works. Through a dialogue on apologetics, entitled “What has the Bible Taught? And what has Geology Proved?” (1862), Darby expressed scepticism of the claims of the 19<sup>th</sup>-century geologists, considering that they rested on “very doubtful evidence”.<sup>11</sup> His *Dialogues* were written in response to the influential anthology *Essays and Reviews* (1860), edited by John Parker.<sup>12</sup> Although six of the seven authors of *Essays and Reviews* were Anglican clerics, their writing supported biblical criticism, rejected miracles and the veracity of biblical prophecy. Darby was very respectful to a literal reading of Scripture after the first two verses, but in some ways was unduly influenced by *Essays and Reviews*.

In terms of geology and the gap theory, Darby suggested the possibility that not all fossil-bearing strata were laid down by the biblical Flood, so he was willing to entertain a gap of indeterminate length between Genesis 1:1 and 1:2. In the context of a theory of mountain upheaval, he was willing to consider that some strata already contained fossils when

the Deluge occurred, and so not all geological remains were cause by the Flood:

“... nor can I see that the Deluge accounts for all [geological remains], because if ... the upheaval theory be correct ... then the mountains which existed at the time of the Deluge have broken up strata which had various fossils already buried in them; that is, the Flood does not appear to have brought them, while unconformable strata prove deposits after the upheaval. Thus there is a proof of strata of different ages. But I am not satisfied entirely as to all the data.”<sup>13</sup>

However, despite this assertion, one of the main lines of evidence that led Darby towards some scepticism about gradual deposition in geology was the presence of polystrate vegetation, such as trees, that extended many metres through the strata. An example was a tree of 20 m (60 ft) length at Craighleith quarry, near Edinburgh, that lay at an angle of 40° through the horizontal strata (Lower Carboniferous, said to be 330 Ma).<sup>14</sup> The belief that such a tree trunk could remain over a period 20,000 years without decomposing Darby considered untenable.<sup>15</sup> Darby further quoted Professor John Phillips’ *Manual of Geology* (1855) in relation to fossil vegetation and strata at High Whitby and Yorkshire.<sup>16</sup> From this Darby wrote that “Such facts as these subvert, as far as I can judge, the whole system of geologists as to deposits.”<sup>16</sup> He commented that “We must distinguish between the facts of geology and the conclusions of geologists. I admit the former; the latter are extremely uncertain, in some respects impossible to be true.”<sup>17</sup>

Despite healthy scepticism towards some of the untenable claims of 19<sup>th</sup>-century geologists, Darby was willing to read into the Genesis creation narrative a gap between verses 1 and 2 that could be filled with millions of years, but unknown in detail—divine revelation was silent on the matter: “What came between the first verse and the second, does not enter into the object of the revelation. Creation, and the forming of the present earth did.”<sup>18</sup>; and “Scripture, which does not reveal scientific facts, is totally silent on them, but leaves a gap which may have been filled by millions of years.”<sup>17</sup> Similar comments appear in *Hints on the Book of Genesis* (1873), suggesting that Scripture is silent on the age of the earth, but not really believing stated ages longer than thousands of years.<sup>19</sup> Darby also commented on such a gap in a *Synopsis of the Old Testament* (1857–1862), writing that “What may have taken place between that time and the moment when the earth (for it only is then spoken of) was without form and void, is left in entire obscurity.”<sup>20</sup>

He was less impressed by the day-age theory. The belief that the six days of creation were extended periods of time he considered to be “somewhat forced”.<sup>21</sup> The structure and coherence of the Genesis 1 account (after verse 1) led to the view that it was “as a statement of the formation of our present world”. Although he qualified this by commenting that he had no “a priori opinion or moral objection to the system of the days being lengthened periods”.<sup>17</sup>



He was unequivocal when it came to understanding the more recent creation of Adam and Eve, considering their creation to be necessarily historical—Adam was specially created as Genesis states, so belief in pre-Adamic races was untenable. In terms of geological evidence, he was sceptical of reports of extinct mammal bones being found with human artefacts in Europe, such as stone tools.<sup>22</sup> He was also adamant that Scripture simply does not allow pre-Adamic races, commenting: “As regards the single pair, Christ and his apostles, particularly Paul, speak of the first man and woman as alone; and all Paul’s doctrine is based on it.” and “the whole account in both chapters speak, as the Lord says, of one man and one woman.”<sup>23</sup> The text, he comments, reveals “an innocent man fallen and driven out, as the head of a race, from God.”<sup>23</sup> This is because the Hebrew text speaks of man in the singular in the first chapter of Genesis, and then in the plural after the formation of Eve, and so all of humanity is “derived from one stock.”<sup>23</sup> Attempts by academics in America to counter this he thought were “excessively poor” and that Livingstone’s (1813–1873) observations were more accurate relating to the unity of mankind.<sup>24</sup> Livingstone had travelled throughout Africa in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and opened the continent to British missionaries.

The position of Darby on these matters was later relayed more widely in the Scofield Reference Bible (as discussed below), and subsequently informed the thinking of many Christians beyond the confines of the Plymouth Brethren.

### George Hawkins Pember (1837–1910)

Another leading Brethren proponent of the gap theory was George Pember, who saw that it might offer a way of harmonizing the Bible with the science of geology. His most notable work along these lines was *Earth’s Earliest Ages* (first published in 1876), which went through several editions. He was also interested in end-time prophecy and in animal welfare. Commenting upon the ruin of a former world, he wrote:

“It is thus clear that the second verse of Genesis describes the earth as a ruin; but there is no hint of the time which elapsed between creation and this ruin. Age after age may have rolled away, and it was probably during their course that the strata of the earth’s crust were gradually developed.”<sup>25</sup>

Whereas Darby had recognized the possibility that the Flood may have caused some of the strata (as noted above, specifically the Carboniferous), Pember had a different view. He saw in the gap the fall of Satan, along with the demise of the dinosaurs prior to Adam, and saw faint glimmers of this from the Scriptures.

“Since, then, the fossil remains are those of creatures anterior to Adam, and yet show evident tokens of disease, death, and mutual destruction, they must have belonged to another world, and have a sin-stained history of their own, a history which ended in the ruin

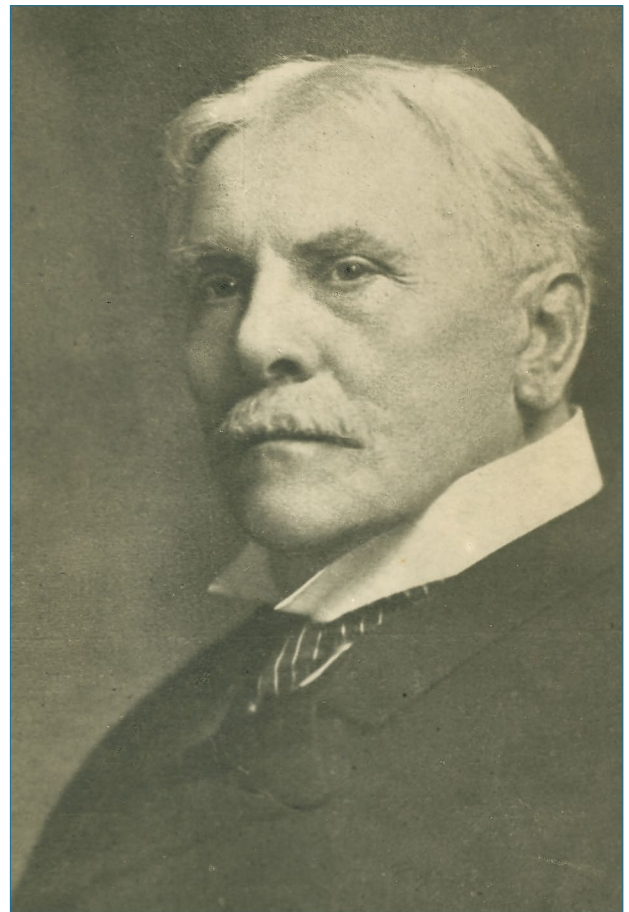


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Figure 2. Cyrus Ingerson Scofield (1843–1921); photo from about 1920.

of themselves and their habitation.”<sup>26</sup>

“Yet, as we peer hopelessly into the night, a faint and unsteady gleam seems to emanate from the Scriptures in our hands, a very different light from which they pour upon other subjects, scarcely more than sufficient to make darkness visible, but enough to reveal the outline of a shadowy form seated on high above the desolation, and looking sullenly down upon his ruined realm. It is our own great enemy, the Prince of this World, and of the Power of the Air.”<sup>27</sup>

While in the text Pember infers that Satan was the cause of the rebellion, in the subheading to the section he writes of the “Probable existence of man in preadamite times”.<sup>21</sup> Pember’s allusion to belief in pre-Adamic man appears several years after Lyell and Darwin had argued that mankind lived long before the biblical accounts allowed.<sup>28</sup> This view had been advocated by the Huguenot Isaac La Peyrère (1596–1676) in his work *Prae-Adamitae*, published in Latin in 1655 (and in English in 1656). However, the Brethren saw the theological difficulties in this opinion (discussed further below), and Darby’s view was preferred. It would seem, however, that the gap theory allowed a great deal of speculation for Bible students and

scholars to fill in. Trying to accommodate Scripture to the latest science risks undermining core Christian doctrines.

### Cyrus Ingerson Scofield and the Scofield Reference Bible

Cyrus Ingerson Scofield (1843–1921) trained as a lawyer and rose to the position of District Attorney for Kansas, before being forced to resign due to financial scandals; that, and heavy drinking, also led to divorce. Following religious conversion, he was ordained as a Congregational minister in 1883 and became a well-known author, most notably through the production of the Scofield Reference Bible (1909, revised 1917).<sup>29</sup> He was mentored by James H. Brookes, who had close links with Darby. Through such connections Darby’s theology was popularized in the reference Bible, gaining widespread appeal among the wider evangelical community. Scofield’s Bible contained section headings and text notes that directed the reader towards a dispensationalist interpretation, and towards belief in old-earth creation. However, the direct influence of Darby’s Exclusive Brethren became increasingly marginalized in Britain (though it remained influential in the Chinese House Church movement through Watchman Nee and Witness Lee).

The main differences between the 1909 edition and that of 1917 are the addition of a preface and Panoramic View of the Bible, the inclusion of dates at the head of the central column of each page, and the change of Roman numerals to Arabic ones for verse references. The 1917 edition continued to be published until 1967 and was hugely popular, with only very minor changes thereafter. Showing superficial adherence to Ussher’s chronology, the introductory comments of the 1917 edition (figure 3) state that Genesis covers a period of 2,315 years, with creation dated to 4004 BC. And yet before each of the first three verses of Genesis 1, there are inserted subheadings as follows: (verse 1) *The Original Creation*, (verse 2) *Earth made waste and empty by judgement*, (with a reference to Jeremiah 4:23–26), and (verse 3) *The new beginning—the first day: light diffused*.

With regard to verse 2, the words ‘waste and empty’, and a reference to the same verse in Jeremiah (4:23), appeared in Goodwin’s contribution to *Essays and Reviews* (although in reverse order). Goodwin wrote: “perhaps the words ‘empty and waste’ would convey to us at present something more nearly approaching the meaning of *tohu va-bohu* than those which the translators have used.”<sup>30</sup> The words also appear in Darby’s Old Testament translation of 1890: “And the earth was waste and empty”. Although this was published after Darby’s death (his supporters used material from his German and French Bibles), it seems to have reflected Darby’s view: the German *Darby Unrevidierte Elferfelder* version (1871) has “wüst und leer”, the Pau-Vevey French translation (1885) has “désolation et vide”. The word ‘waste’ also appears in

Darby’s *Dialogue on Essays and Reviews*, that “Earth now comes out of the waste to be fruit-bearing.”<sup>31</sup>

In Scofield’s text notes relating to Genesis 1, it is asserted that three creative acts were recorded in the text: “(1) the heavens and the earth, v. 1; (2) animal life, v. 21; (3) and human life, vv. 26, 27. The first creative act refers to the dateless past, and gives scope for all the geologic ages.”<sup>32</sup> As noted, justification is given in terms of the text of Jeremiah 4:23–26 (and also Isaiah 24:1 and 45:18), which he thought clearly indicated that the earth had been subject to “a cataclysmic change as the result of divine judgment.” Marks of such a catastrophe were said to be observable widely across the earth, effectively ascribing the evidence of the actual biblical cataclysm (Noah’s Flood) to another watery event that was before Adam. He writes that with the “restoration of dry land”, the seeds of plants would have survived the catastrophe and germinated once more. Instead, it was “*animal* life which perished, the traces of which remain as fossils [emphasis in original].”<sup>32</sup> The stated purpose of ascribing the fauna found in the fossil record to the ‘primitive creation’, is so that no conflict need arise between science and the Genesis creation account. The judgment of the primitive catastrophe he also considered to be connected to the fall of Satan and the fallen Angels, with reference to Ezekiel 28:12–15 and Isaiah 14:9–14. The inference is that these passages go beyond the immediate reference to the rulers of Tyre and Babylon.<sup>32</sup>

Furthermore, in context, Jeremiah 4:23–26 is a prophecy against Israel; Jeremiah is seeing the future state of the land and writing in the present tense, comparing the destruction of Israel to the condition that existed in Genesis 1:2—that is ‘formless and empty’. It doesn’t mean that we should read into the first two verses the destruction, or *waste*, of a former world as suggested in Goodwin’s contribution to the critical *Essays and Review*.<sup>30</sup> The same applies for Isaiah 24, which should not be thrown into the past, but read in its own context as a prophecy against Israel.

With the primitive creation of the heavens and the earth ascribed to before the gap, Scofield (and Darby) had to deal with the formation of light, and the planets and stars that were placed within the text of the six-days of creation. Scofield suggested that the stated creation of light (in verse 3) should not be read as an ‘original *creative* act’ because “A different word is used.” The heavenly bodies merely appeared and became visible, and the sun shone its light as the clouds dissipated.<sup>33</sup>

Scofield was more sympathetic than Darby to the view that the days of creation need not be 24 hours long, but could be “a period of time, long or short, during which certain revealed purposes of God are to be accomplished”. Even though the text specifies ‘evening’ and ‘morning’, which may restrict the interpretation to a solar day, he suggested that “the frequent parabolic use of natural phenomena” may justify a different conclusion. Each day may then be seen as “a period of time marked off by a beginning and ending.”<sup>34</sup>



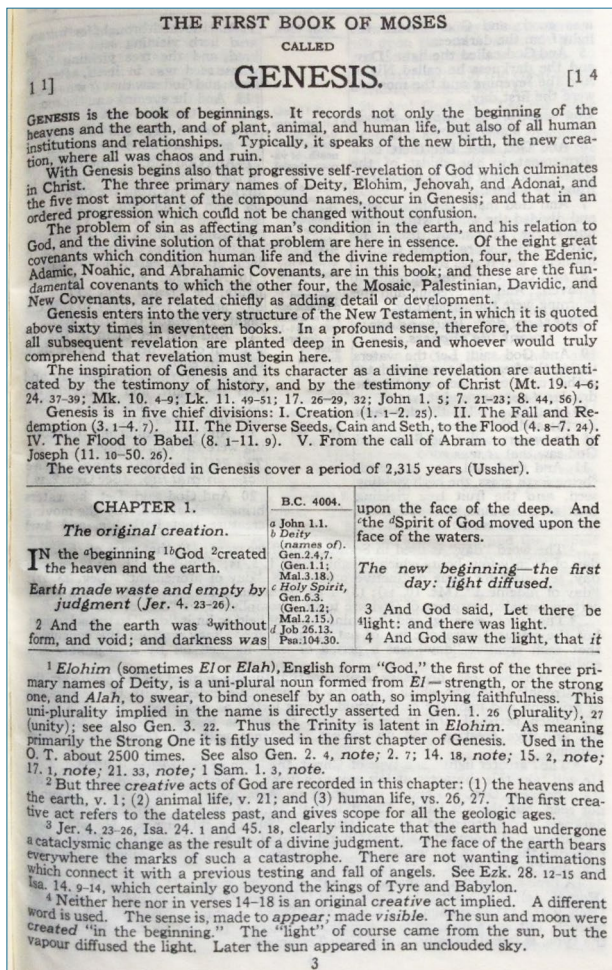


Figure 3. Scofield Reference Bible (1917 version) showing the first page of Genesis

Despite the move to imagine a primitive creation and former divine judgment that left the fossil evidence, Scofield, like Darby, was committed to rejecting the evolution of mankind. The revealed facts he considered are that "(1) Man was *created* not *evolved* [emphasis in original]", a position which he said was supported by the teachings of Christ: "This is ... expressly declared, and the declaration is confirmed by Christ", referencing (Matthew 19:14 and Mark 10:6).<sup>35</sup> He noted a huge gulf between humanity and the animals, the highest of which exhibit no evidence of 'God-consciousness', which is akin to 'the religious nature'—nothing in science has bridged this distinction.<sup>35</sup>

It may be noted that a gap between Genesis 1:1 and 1:2 fitted within Darby's wider dispensationalist theology, and this theology was supported by Scofield. As noted, dispensationalism divides Judeo-Christian history into distinct periods of grace for mankind, the first beginning with Adam, and there are also theological gaps relating

to eschatology.<sup>36</sup> But while the gap theory fitted with the division of Scripture along dispensationalist lines, I don't think it was the main driver for acceptance: respectability in scientific society was probably a stronger reason. Indeed, the gap between the first two verses was specifically excluded from Scofield's seven dispensations, which related only to mankind.

However, Scofield argued that it was right to divide Scripture. In a pamphlet entitled *Rightly Dividing the Word of Truth*<sup>37</sup> Scofield appealed to 2 Timothy 2:15 in support of his position, which reads in the KJV:

"Study to show thyself approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, rightly dividing [Gk: ὀρθοτομοῦντα, *orthotomounta*] the word of truth" (2 Timothy 2:15).

He wrote that "The Word of truth, then, has right divisions, and ... any study of that Word which ignores those divisions must be in large measure profitless and confusing." The phrase "rightly dividing the word of truth" provided justification for this hermeneutic. And yet the KJV translation, on which this interpretation rests, is rather poor. A more accurate rendition was given in Darby's more literal translation from 1890, which reads "cutting in a straight line the word of truth." Darby had a much greater ability in Greek and did not seem to use this verse to justify his gap theory or his wider dispensationalist theology.<sup>38</sup> Rather surprisingly, Scofield adds no text note to 2 Timothy 2:15 in his reference Bible relating to division, perhaps suggesting he may have recognized his earlier pamphlet was in error.<sup>39</sup>

## Conclusion

The position of Darby, Pember, and Scofield has been outlined. The gap theory allowed these theologians to imaginatively fill in a story between Genesis 1:1 and 1:2, in order to harmonize the latest geological claims relating to deep time with the biblical account. Thus, the gap theory was developed in the 19<sup>th</sup> century in response to the claims of secular geology. The theological justification for the gap theory appears to have arisen from Thomas Chalmers, and Parker's *Essays and Review*. This later work was written by liberal Christians who were engaged in biblical criticism, and in many ways opposed to belief in miracles and a literal reading of the text. Despite the accommodation of the biblical text by Darby and Scofield towards acceptance of an old Earth, their opposition to the evolution of mankind led many Brethren and other evangelicals to resist acceptance of evolution over subsequent decades. It is notable that a number of contemporary adherents to Intelligent Design and old-earth creation from the British Isles have some connection to the Brethren movement.

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- See, for example, Mortenson, T., *The Great Turning Point*, Master Books, Green Forest AR, 2004.
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- Darby, ref. 11, pp. 132–133.
- For more information, see: Lyon, G., Discovery of a new fossil tree in Craigleith Quarry, Edinburgh, *Trans. of the Edinburgh Geological Society* 2(2):219–220, 1873 | [doi.org/10.1144/transed.2.2.219](https://doi.org/10.1144/transed.2.2.219). This suggests that Darby was slightly in error over the length of the finds.
- Darby, ref. 11, pp. 133–134: "at Craigleith, near Edinburgh, a tree some sixty feet long, lies slanting at an angle of 40° across the strata in its whole length. Now that a tree remained 20,000 years slanting thus, while the sea deposited this strata, is not to be believed."
- Darby, ref. 11, p. 134. Darby's quotation of John Phillips: "the nearly vertical position of certain fossil plants, a phenomenon by no means rare amongst sandstone rocks, affords good grounds for caution in assigning very great extensions of years to geological periods ... the accumulation of transported sediment must have been so rapid as to prevent the decomposition of the vertical [Phillips: cortical] portions of the plants. ... No one doubts that the bed of stone three feet thick which encloses equisetum columnar at High Whitby, was laid by a single inundation ...; and again [Phillips: About the same] the sigillaria in the coal sandstones of Yorkshire ... pass through more than one, sometimes four or five beds of stone." This is from Phillips, J., *Manual of Geology; Practical and theoretical*, Richard Griffin and Co., London and Glasgow, pp. 621–622, 1855. Darby's quotation is not clearly referenced, and rather careless (differences with the original are in square brackets above).
- Darby, ref. 11, p. 146. Darby further defended the Deluge in 1863 against Bishop Colenso, although he saw it more in supernatural terms; see: Darby, J.N., *Dr Colenso and the Pentateuch*, G. Morrish, London, pp. 8–9, 1863.
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- Darby, ref. 11, pp. 136–137. "I have no kind of opinion or moral objection to the system of the days being lengthened periods, but it seems to me somewhat forced."
- Darby, ref. 11, pp. 131–152, more specifically, p. 135. This was also the view of Phillips in his *Manual of Geology*, pp. 435–438. See also: Sibley, A., William Pengelly's Brixham cave excavations, and belief in the antiquity of man, [creation.com/pengelly-cave-excavations](http://creation.com/pengelly-cave-excavations), 2022.
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- Darby, ref. 11, p. 140.
- Scofield, ref. 29, text notes on vv. 1, 2, and 11.
- Scofield, ref. 29, text notes on vv. 3, 14–18, and Darby, ref. 19. Darby did not consider the large eyes of the ichthyosaurs living in the darkness of the deep (Genesis 1:2) to be a problem. He states: "I have no difficulty about the light. ... it is not the object of scripture to teach it."
- Scofield, ref. 29, text notes on verse 5.
- Scofield, ref. 29, text notes on verse 26.
- Huebner, R.A., John Nelson Darby: Precious truths revived and defended, vol. 1; in: *Revival of Truth 1826–1845*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn, Present Truth Publishers, Jackson, NJ, pp. 7–18, 2004. For example, that the church is a parenthesis in the narrative of Israel, that a gap exists somewhere between Daniel's 69<sup>th</sup> week and the 70<sup>th</sup>, and also between a secret rapture and the second coming of Christ.
- Scofield, C.I., *Rightly Dividing the Word of Truth*, Loizeaux Bros., Bible Truth Depot, New York, 1896.
- The normal usage of the verb (ὀρθοτομέω orthotomeó) is to cut straight in terms of a road or path between two places, or to plough a straight furrow. It implies, then, that we are to handle and use the Word of God in a right manner and not to divide it up. Darby evidently had other influences that led him to accept the gap theory.
- Scofield, ref. 29, opening comments in *A Panoramic View of the Bible*, Scofield also seems to have softened his view regarding divisions in the Bible, although still retaining a gap between the first two verses.

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