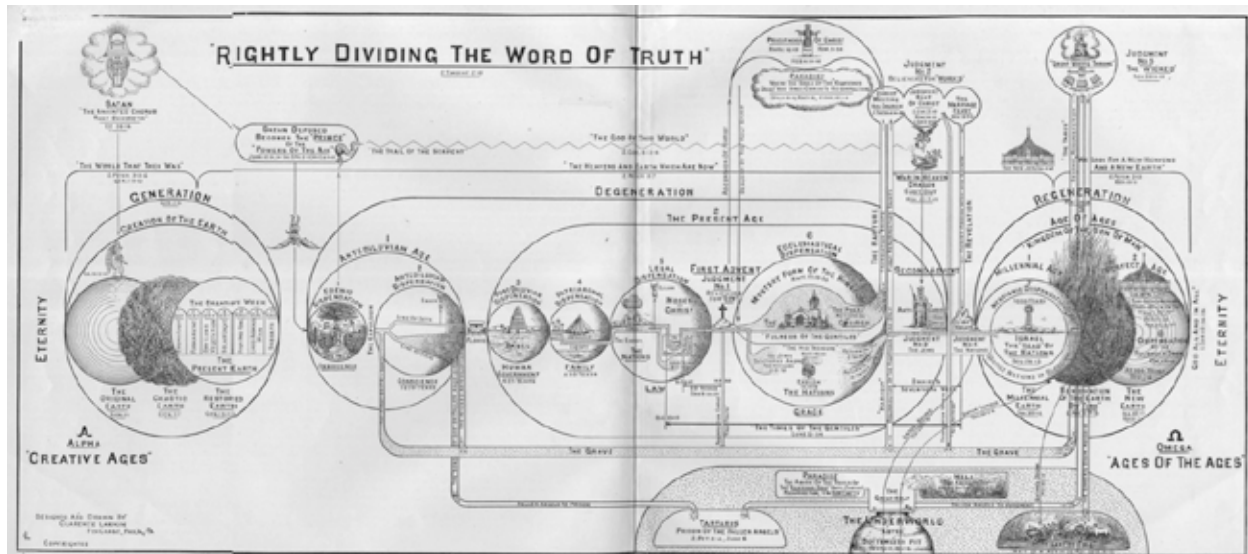


Rightly Dividing the Word of Truth

A.T. Coates



Clarence Larkin, "Rightly Dividing the Word of Truth," 1920

Clarence Larkin's dispensationalist chart "Rightly Dividing the Word of Truth" (1920) offers a detailed schematic of biblical history. The artistic product of an individual with experience in mechanical draftsmanship, Larkin's chart shows how events and epochs fit together like parts in a salvation machine.

Taken from the weighty "atlas" edition of *Dispensational Truth*, Larkin's book of charts, "Rightly Dividing the Word of Truth" presents a God's-eye view of history on a single 22"x11" page. Larkin called this his "main" chart. In a single visual field, the chart moves in linear fashion from Alpha to Omega, from past eternity on the left to future eternity on the right. Along its central horizontal axis, the chart's circles and ovals depict a traditional dispensationalist understanding of the divisions of history: they "rightly divide" time to make sense of biblical prophecies.

Larkin uses this chart as a frame of reference for the rest of his book. The ages and dispensations that appear here also re-appear as full-page charts later in the volume, as he expands on the significant events, characteristic features, and special prophecies of each particular epoch. Larkin imagines his charts like a series of increasingly powerful microscope lenses: later charts offer greater and greater levels of detail but remain in a fixed position relative to the whole depicted here. Taken as a group, Larkin's charts argue that biblical prophecy presents a coherent, accurate picture of history on both micro and macro scales. Because his charts agree in both the major and minor details of the past, Larkin surmises, they can also offer detailed information about the future. He argues that "[Biblical] Prophecy is not a haphazard guess, like our weather probabilities, it is **History Written in Advance.**"¹

Larkin's chart creates a special kind of time: sacred time. It depicts spiritual activities in the mythic narrative of divine history with vertical lines that intersect the horizontal axis of calendrical time. Earth's past and dispensationalism's mythic narrative collide at these intersections and create events of significance for salvation history. For example, beneath the cross in the center of the image, there is a span labeled "69 Weeks." Later in the text, Larkin uses a mathematical formula to explain how this phrase from the prophet Daniel refers to the exact number of days between the proclamation to rebuild the Temple in Nehemiah and Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem. In Larkin's highly symbolic image, this entire span represents a special event in salvation history: his lines mark a moment when God pushed the hands of the clock.

Like most fundamentalists and dispensationalists, Larkin proudly called himself a biblical "literalist." He described his guiding artistic principle as "[letting] the Scriptures say what they want to say."² Despite the apparent simplicity of such a perspective, Larkin's "literalism" actually means several things. First, it means that Bible prophecies describe real events in the past and the future. No matter how ethereal or fantastic they may seem, Larkin's work argued that biblical passages have referents in the real world. Relatedly, for Larkin "literalism" meant that biblical prophecies refer to visible characters and tangible things. Far from mere literary imagery, Larkin read the prophets' lakes of fire, white thrones, and seven-headed leopards as accurate physical descriptions on which he ought to base his drawings. He believed that the minute details of biblical images offered symbolic clues about the meaning of prophecies. Larkin's chart creates its "literal" interpretation by arranging these symbolic visualizations of prophecy alongside selective Bible references. For Clarence Larkin, a person "rightly divided the Word of Truth" by assembling disconnected Bible references and symbolic imagery into a coherent whole. The intricate picture that emerged became the "literal" meaning of the Bible.

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Notes

1. Clarence Larkin, *The Greatest Book on "Dispensational Truth" in the World* (1918; reprint Philadelphia, PA: Rev. Clarence Larkin Est., 1920), 4. Emphasis original.

2. Larkin, *Dispensational Truth*, foreword.