

DISPENSATIONAL HERMENEUTICS

Thomas D. Ice

“Consistently literal or plain interpretation is indicative of a dispensational approach to the interpretation of the Scriptures,” declared Charles Ryrie in 1965. “And it is this very consistency—the strength of dispensational interpretation—that irks the nondispensationalist and becomes the object of his ridicule.”¹ “Consistently literal interpretation” was listed by Ryrie as the second most important *sine qua non* of dispensationalism, which forms the foundation for the most important essential, “the distinction between Israel and the Church.”² Earl Radmacher, in 1979, went so far as to say that literal interpretation “is the ‘bottom-line’ of dispensationalism.”³ While the ridicule of nondispensationalists has continued, there also appear to be signs of hermeneutical equivocation within the ranks of dispensationalism.

Within contemporary dispensationalism, some are moving away from the generally held hermeneutical statements of Ryrie and Radmacher. Craig Blasing concluded “that consistently literal exegesis is inadequate to describe the essential distinctive of dispensationalism. Development is taking place on how to characterize a proper hermeneutic for dispensationalists.”⁴ Blasing and his coauthor Darrell Bock assert that the grammatical-historical hermeneutic “is shared broadly in evangelicalism, so consequently present-day dispensationalists do not think of themselves as having an exclusive hermeneutic.”⁵

Outside dispensational circles some would admit that dispensational hermeneutics “continues to exercise a widespread influence among evangelical Christians today.”⁶ However, many do continue to see the literal approach as an object of ridicule. Most likely, the loudest voice of dissent against the consistent literal hermeneutic of dispensationalism is from Christian Reconstructionists. Kenneth Gentry labels the dispensational claim to consistently literal interpretation as a “presumption” that “is unreasonable” and “an impossible ideal.”⁷

A DEFINITION OF LITERAL INTERPRETATION

Many times dispensationalists have explained what they mean when they speak of “literal interpretation.” Ryrie begins his discussion of literal interpretation by referring to Bernard Ramm, who wrote the standard hermeneutics textbook of his day: “Dispensationalists claim that their principle of hermeneutics is that of literal interpretation. This means interpretation which gives to every word the same meaning it would have in normal usage, whether employed in writing, speaking or thinking.”⁸ He then formulates an extensive definition:

This is sometimes called the principle of grammatical-historical interpretation since the meaning of each word is determined by grammatical and historical considerations. The principle might also be called normal interpretation since the literal meaning of words is the normal approach to their understanding in all languages. It might also be designated plain interpretation so that no one receives the mistaken notion that the literal principle rules out figures of

speech. Symbols, figures of speech and types are all interpreted plainly in this method and they are in no way contrary to literal interpretation. After all, the very existence of any meaning for a figure of speech depends on the reality of the literal meaning of the terms involved. Figures often make the meaning plainer, but it is the literal, normal, or plain meaning that they convey to the reader.⁹

Ryrie concludes his statement of the dispensational position by quoting E. R. Craven's oft cited summary of literalism:

The *literalist* (so called) is not one who denies that *figurative* language, that *symbols*, are used in prophecy, nor does he deny that great *spiritual* truths are set forth therein; his position is, simply, that the prophecies are to be *normally* interpreted (i.e., according to received laws of language) as any other utterances are interpreted—that which is manifestly figurative being so regarded.¹⁰

On the one hand, many current dispensationalists believe that Ryrie's statement is adequate and that literal interpretation still is (should be) a defining tenet of dispensationalism. Many believe that they have been able to satisfactorily interpret the details of Scripture and harmonize their exegetical conclusions into a theology that is the product of consistent literal interpretation. On the other hand, there are many, inside and outside of dispensationalism, who see problems with such an approach. We will now consider some objections.

USES OF LITERALISM

Vern Poythress spends two chapters interacting with Ryrie and other dispensational expressions of literal interpretation in *Understanding Dispensationalists*.¹¹ Poythress presents dispensationalists as using the word *literal* in such a fluid manner that it is often difficult to know exactly what is meant. “Perhaps the word,” he suggests, “has already unconsciously been loaded with some of the assumptions belonging to the theological system.”¹²

He says literal interpretation can be used in four ways. First is “first thought meaning,” which is said to describe “the meaning for words in isolation.”¹³ The second kind he calls “flat interpretation,” by which he means an *a priori* commitment to an idea of “literal *if possible*.”¹⁴ Third, the one who uses grammatical-historical interpretation “reads passages as organic wholes and tries to understand what each passage expresses against the background of the original human author and the original situation.”¹⁵ His fourth type is “plain interpretation,” where one “reads everything as if it were written directly to oneself, in one's own time and culture.” This is opposed to grammatical-historical interpretation.¹⁶ Poythress sees the dispensationalist use of literal interpretation as “a confusing term, capable of being used to beg many of the questions at stake in the interpretation of the Bible.”¹⁷

Though it is true that dispensationalists have used *literal* in at least two ways,

Poythress's charge that it has led to confusion and not answered important questions is not justified. Apparently Ryrie's statement was clear enough for Poythress to work his way through it and break it up into classifications corresponding with his categories. Much of the verbiage used by dispensationalists (i.e., normal, plain, grammatical-historical) are attempts to spell out what is meant by *literal* in light of critical objections to such an approach.

Elliott Johnson has noted that much of the confusion over literal interpretation can be removed when one properly understands the two primary ways the term has been used down through church history: "(1) the clear, plain sense of a word or phrase as over against a figurative use, and (2) a system that views the text as providing the basis of the true interpretation."¹⁸ Thus, dispensationalists, by and large, have used the term *literal* to refer to their system of interpretation (the consistent use of the grammatical-historical system), and once inside that system, *literal* refers to whether or not a specific word or phrase is used in its context in a figurative or literal sense. This helps us understand why Radmacher describes the system of literal interpretation (Johnson's no. 2) as "both plain-literal and figurative-literal"¹⁹ (Johnson's no. 1).

Johnson's second use of *literal* (i.e., systematic literalism) is simply the grammatical-historical system consistently used. The grammatical-historical system was revived by the Reformers. It was set against the spiritual (spiritualized) or deeper meaning of the text that was the approach of the middle ages. The literal meaning was used simply as a springboard to a deeper ("spiritual") meaning, which was viewed as more desirable. A classic spiritualized interpretation would see the four rivers of Genesis 2—the Pishon, Havilah, Tigris, and Euphrates—as representing the body, soul, spirit, and mind. Coming from such a system, the Reformers saw the need to get back to the literal or textual meaning of the Bible. For instance, Martin Luther wanted to debate John Eck from the text of the Bible.

The *system* of literal interpretation is the grammatical-historical, or textual, approach to hermeneutics. Use of literalism in this sense could be called "macroliteralism." Within macroliteralism, the consistent use of the grammatical-historical system yields the interpretative conclusion, for example, that *Israel* always and only refers to national Israel. The church will not be substituted for Israel if the grammatical-historical system of interpretation is consistently used because there are no indicators in the text that such is the case. Therefore, one must bring an idea from outside the text by saying that the passage really means something that it does not actually say. This kind of replacement approach is a mild form of spiritualized, or allegorical, interpretation. So when speaking of those who do replace *Israel* with the church as not taking the Bible literally and spiritualizing the text, it is true, since such a belief is contrary to a macroliteral interpretation.

Consistently literal interpreters, within the framework of the grammatical-historical system, do discuss whether or not a word, phrase, or the literary genre of a biblical book is a figure of speech (connotative use of language) or is to be taken literally/plainly (denotative use of language). This is Johnson's first use of *literal*, which could be called "microliteralism." Ramm has said:

The literal meaning of the figurative expression is the proper or natural meaning as understood by students of language. Whenever a figure is used its literal meaning is precisely that meaning determined by grammatical studies of figures. Hence, figurative interpretation does not pertain to the spiritual or mystical sense of Scripture, but to the literal sense.²⁰

Thus, within microliteralism, there may be discussion by literalists as to whether or not a given word or phrase is being used as a figure of speech, based on the context of a given passage. Some passages are quite naturally clearer than others and a consensus among interpreters develops, whereas other passages may find literal interpreters divided as to whether or not they should be understood as figures of speech. This is more a problem of application than of method.

Reconstructionist Kenneth Gentry, in his attack on consistent literal interpretation, argues that “*consistent* literalism is unreasonable.”²¹ One of the ways he attempts to prove his point is by arguing that, since dispensationalists take some words and phrases as figures of speech, they are not consistently literal.²² He asserts that “the dispensational claim to ‘*consistent* literalism’ is frustrating due to its inconsistent employment.”²³ Gentry seeks to discredit the dispensational hermeneutic by giving examples of dispensationalists who interpret certain passages as containing figures of speech, citing this as inconsistent with the system of literal interpretation. According to Gentry, the dispensationalist has to abandon literal interpretation when he realizes that Jesus refers figuratively to Himself as a door in John 10:9.²⁴ Gentry is not defining literal interpretation the way dispensationalists do. Therefore, his conclusions about literal interpretation are misguided because he commonly mixes the two senses described by Johnson. When speaking of the macroliteral, he uses an example from microliteralism, and vice versa, therefore appearing to have shown an inconsistency in literal interpretation. In reality, the examples cited fall within the framework of how dispensationalists have defined what they mean by literal interpretation.

IS LITERALISM PRIMARILY A PHILOSOPHICAL CONCEPT?

Vern Poythress has charged that “classic dispensationalists have ‘hedged’ on the idea of fulfillment. They possess an idea of fulfillment and an idea of literalness that make it almost impossible in principle for the opponent to give a counterexample.”²⁵ Gentry echoes Poythress when he says that aspects of dispensational interpretation are “a preconceived hermeneutic,” and asks, “Why must we begin with the assumption of literalism?”²⁶ The implication is that, if it is an idea, then it did not develop from Scripture and is thus suspect.

Ryrie did state his hermeneutic as ideals, but that is because he is summarizing principles. These principles have been verified and developed, in the mind of the dispensationalist, through volumes of specific exegesis from the text of Scripture. It would be hard to prove that literal interpretation is merely a form of idealism forced upon the text because some have expressed principles of interpretation or tried to support the literal approach with a philosophical argument. How else can one present a summary of conclusions except as principles that include ideas?²⁷ Many dispensationalists

believe that a philosophical rationale could be removed from the defense of literalism and the approach could still be developed and defended inductively from Scripture.

No doubt, the human thought process involves an interplay between ideas and data, so nothing is purely the product of sheer inductive observation. Presuppositions can be tested and verified or rejected through the hermeneutical spiral or circle. But to argue against literalism on the grounds that it is a form of idealism, masking the richness of God's Word, is misguided.

In a related issue, some say dispensationalists reflect a “common sense” or “plain sense” *a priori* philosophical influence from eighteenth or nineteenth century rationalism when employing the “literal if possible” principle.²⁸ David Cooper gives a classic statement of this hermeneutical principle in his “Golden Rule of Interpretation”:

When the plain sense of Scripture makes common sense, seek no other sense; therefore, take every word at its primary, ordinary, usual, literal meaning unless the facts of the immediate context, studied in the light of related passages and axiomatic and fundamental truths, indicate clearly otherwise.²⁹

Cooper's “Golden Rule” should not necessarily be classified as one reflecting “Scottish Common Sense Realism” (as some have asserted) primarily because it is a literary not a philosophical statement. Cooper does not use the phrase “common sense,” as critics suggest, by appealing to an abstract theory of common understanding latent in humanity. Instead, he defines it within a literary context. Common sense for Cooper is controlled by the context of Scripture, not some idea of common meaning residing in the reader of Scripture. Terms like “primary,” “ordinary,” “usual,” and “literal” meaning are developed literarily from Scripture within Cooper's rule, as well as theologically (i.e., “axiomatic and fundamental truths”). The tactic of pouring a meaning not intended by its users into “common sense” falls by the wayside upon close examination. Cooper's rule is a helpful guide for discerning the Bible's use of literal or figurative language within the consistently literal system of interpretation.

Kenneth Gentry, who has charged dispensationalists with having a “preconceived hermeneutic” which builds upon “the assumption of literalism,”³⁰ could be accused of a similar fault. He says, “it should be the Christian's practice that: (1) the clearer statements interpret the less clear . . . and (2) our hermeneutic should not be *a priori*, but derived from Scripture itself, allowing Scripture to interpret Scripture.”³¹ While agreeing with these two canons of interpretation, the point to be made is that, if a “flaw of dispensationalism is its *a priori* ‘literal’ hermeneutic,”³² how do Gentry's two points escape the same problem? What may be presumed to be a clear statement by one person may not be for another. If hermeneutics should not be *a priori*, how does one ever start the process of biblical investigation without at least assuming an approach that could then be verified? That is the approach commonly taken by literalists; they believe that their hermeneutic has been verified from the Scriptures themselves as a result of dealing with specific texts.³³

COMPLEMENTARY HERMENEUTICS?

“Progressive Dispensationalism” is the self-proclaimed title of a new form of dispensationalism that has arisen within the last few years. This new dispensationalism denies that consistent literal interpretation is a defining essential. One of its formulators, Craig Blaising, has declared “that consistently literal exegesis is inadequate to describe the essential distinctive of dispensationalism.”³⁴ It appears, however, after reading Blaising and Bock's book containing a statement of this new dispensationalism (*Dispensationalism, Israel and the Church*), even though subtitled *The Search for Definition*, that they do not even attempt to delineate essentials.

Blaising believes that earlier dispensationalists were ill-affected by Baconian inductivism, which produced unwarranted certainty about their theology. He believes that the Baconian propensity to produce a list of summary points flowing from inductive analysis accounts for Ryrie's *sine qua non* of dispensationalism (apparently instead of valid interaction with the biblical text.) Therefore, Blaising called Ryrie's formulation of dispensationalism “conceptual naïveté”³⁵ and labeled this phase “essentialist dispensationalism”³⁶ because of the three essentials. Instead of recognizing clear essentials, Blaising appears to think one can only say that there are patterns characteristic of the phases of the dispensational tradition.³⁷

Blaising's “pattern approach” raises some important questions about his definition of dispensationalism. Mainly, if there are no essential guidelines, or proposed guidelines are vague and fluid, how does one determine who is a dispensationalist? It seems that with the pattern approach one simply observes the different forms dispensationalism has taken in the past, while at the same time allowing for virtually any new “developments,” resulting in no meaningful definition.

It appears that by following the pattern approach anyone who claims to be a dispensationalist would have to be considered one. To conclude otherwise would reflect an “essentialist” standard such as Ryrie has suggested, which is to be rejected, according to Blaising. If one opts to use only past historic patterns, then they have not allowed for development, the very thing the new dispensationalism advocates. Perhaps this explains why Blaising and Bock only *describe* progressive dispensationalism in their concluding summary chapter, while avoiding a list of essentials.

Examination of the progressive dispensational approach helps to explain why its proponents would need to discredit a hermeneutical *sine qua non* in order to propose a looser system they call “complementary hermeneutics.” Complementary hermeneutics involves “the New Testament . . . introduc[ing] change and advance; it does not merely repeat Old Testament revelation,” according to Blaising and Bock. “In making complementary additions, however, it does not jettison old promises. The enhancement is not at the expense of the original promise.”³⁸

Complementary hermeneutics appears to involve an attempted synthesis of the spiritualizing and literal methods that have developed out of issues relating to the New Testament's use of the Old Testament. The issue is not a distinct hermeneutic but debate about how to apply the hermeneutic that we share. The question most simply put is, “How does ‘new’ revelation impact ‘old’ revelation and expression?”

This approach leads to a position that sees Christ currently reigning on David's

throne. Traditionally, dispensationalists have made a distinction between Christ's present session at the right hand of the Father's throne versus His future, but not yet, millennial reign from Jerusalem on David's throne. A present spiritual reign, as put forth by Bock, has in the past been the position of amillennialists, postmillennialists, and a few nondispensationalist premillennialists, but not of dispensationalists.³⁹ Bock does not go so far as to replace Israel of the Old Testament with the church, since he retains a significant amount of literalism that can be seen in his commitment to a futurist eschatology. But this hermeneutic involves a spiritualized interpretation rejected by earlier dispensationalists, in spite of revisionist attempts by Blaising to characterize older dispensationalists like Darby and Scofield as occasional spiritualizers.⁴⁰

Did Darby and Scofield use a spiritualized hermeneutic? It does not appear that they did in the sense being suggested by Poythress and Blaising. Poythress treats the dispensationalist's approach to typology as if it were part of their hermeneutical approach. Typology, for dispensationalists like Darby and Scofield, is used for theological illustrations only after all passages involved have first been interpreted literally. Then "patterns" are observed and comparisons made only for the purpose of illustrating (1 Cor. 10:6, 11). Thus, if the story of Joseph in Genesis were to be used typologically to correspond to aspects of the life of Christ or God's program for Israel, it would only be so used after the Genesis narrative had been interpreted literally. Typology would not be involved in interpreting the Genesis text.

However, typology is also a part of the hermeneutic of some nondispensational approaches to the Bible. This sometimes appears to be used as a form of spiritualization (i.e., the church replaces Israel). Indeed, Poythress realizes that he may be misrepresenting Scofield when he says, "Many present-day dispensationalists would see Scofield's examples of spiritualization as 'applications' rather than, interpretations that give the actual meaning of the passage."⁴¹ (Actually, they probably are closer to illustration than to application.) Therefore, Poythress, and then Blaising, confused Darby and Scofield's use of typology as a part of their hermeneutic—hence the misrepresentation that they used a form of spiritualized hermeneutic. Could it be that Blaising is using this misrepresentation as part of his historical polemic against Ryrie's belief that consistent literal interpretation is an essential feature of dispensationalism, and thus be suggesting that this is justification for the spiritualizing of the new dispensationalism? If Poythress's and Blaising's contention of spiritualization by older dispensationalists cannot be supported, then new dispensationalism's claim to be practicing a hermeneutic that has been used by previous phases of dispensationalism would not, in fact, have that historical antecedent in dispensationalism (see chapter 4).

HOW THE NEW TESTAMENT USES THE OLD TESTAMENT

Development of "complementary hermeneutics" by new dispensationalists revolves around issues related to how New Testament writers handle the Old Testament. Blaising and Bock present three approaches to the question. They could be viewed as the traditional literal approach, the spiritual approach, and the new complementary approach.⁴²

The complementary approach put forth by Blaising and Bock is claimed to be a

synthesis combining the answer of older dispensationalism, which demonstrates a greater sensitivity to “the historical interpretation of the Old Testament,” while adopting covenant theology's view that includes the “adding of new revelation.”⁴³ Bock has suggested, in the process of interpreting Peter's use of Joel in Acts 2, that the “eschaton has begun; the movement toward the culmination of the eschaton has started, as have the benefits associated with the coming of the Day of the Lord.”⁴⁴

It appears that, in the minds of Blaising and Bock, their complementary hermeneutical synthesis lends support to their theological dualism of an “already/not yet” view of the Davidic kingdom rule. “Both dispensations [Church Age and Millennium] are also united as aspects of the messianic reign of Christ.... Both dispensations are seen in the New Testament as fulfillments of the Davidic covenant.”⁴⁵ Bock sees “the presence of fulfillment” in Peter's use of Joel in Acts 2 and adds, “it is not a comparison.”⁴⁶ However, Blaising and Bock appear to be in agreement with older dispensationalists who tend to see the Old Testament passages as left untouched by New Testament development: “The enhancement is not at the expense of the original promise.”⁴⁷

Ken Gentry, representing a traditional covenant approach, believes that “*the Christian exegete must allow the New Testament to interpret the Old Testament. . . . This approach to biblical interpretation allows the conclusive revelation of God in the New Testament authoritatively to interpret incomplete revelation in the Old.*”⁴⁸ This would be a sound statement if Gentry meant that the Scripture was expanded down through history (progressive revelation) as more details and explanation are added in such a way as not to change the meaning of an original Old Testament passage through reinterpretation in the New Testament (i.e., the church replacing Israel in OT passages). But that is not what Gentry means. His approach is a so-called “grammatical-historical-*theological*” hermeneutic, whereby it is believed that the New Testament gives a theological basis for changing the original meaning of the Old Testament. Gentry believes that New Testament theology gives him the liberty to take Old Testament passages and apply them “spiritually” to the church. He asks, “Why cannot there be a *spiritual Israel*?”⁴⁹ From the perspective of covenant theology, it is sometimes taught that spiritualization of the Old Testament is needed to make it conform to the doctrine of the New Testament.

But must one adopt an element of spiritualization (i.e., the New Testament [re]interprets the Old Testament) into one's hermeneutic in order to properly understand how the New Testament uses the Old Testament? That seems to be unnecessary.

Arnold Fruchtenbaum claims that the New Testament writers (all were Jewish) quote the Old Testament in the common Jewish way in the first century. “They often gave a spiritual meaning or a new application to an Old Testament text without denying that what the original said literally did or will happen.”⁵⁰ Fruchtenbaum cites four ways the New Testament quotes from the old and notes that Matthew 2 contains an example of all four uses (see chapter 4). “The first example is called *literal prophecy plus literal fulfillment*.”⁵¹

This example is found in Matthew 2:5-6, which quotes Micah 5:2. In the

original context of Micah 5:2, the prophet is speaking prophetically and prophesying that whenever the Messiah is born, He will be born in Bethlehem of Judah. That is the literal meaning of Micah 5:2. When a literal prophecy is fulfilled in the New Testament, it is quoted as a literal fulfillment. Many prophecies fall into this category, such as Isaiah 7:14, 52:13-53:12, Zechariah 9:9, etc.⁵²

The second classification is called *literal plus typical*.⁵³

This example is found in Matthew 2:15, which is a quotation of Hosea 11:1. However, the original context is not a prophecy, it is an historical event. It is a reference to the Exodus when Israel, the national son of God, was brought out of Egypt. It is obvious that Hosea is thinking of literal Israel for in the following verses he points out how Israel quickly slipped into idolatry. The *literal* meaning in context of Hosea 11:1 is a reference to the Exodus. There is nothing in the New Testament that can change or reinterpret the meaning of Hosea 11:1, nor does the New Testament deny that the literal Exodus actually happened. However, Israel as the national son of God coming out of Egypt becomes a *type* of the individual Son of God, the Messiah coming out of Egypt. The passage is quoted, not as a fulfillment of prophecy, since Hosea 11:1 was not a prophecy to begin with, but as a type. Matthew does not deny, change, or reinterpret the original meaning. He understands it literally, but the literal Old Testament event becomes a type of a New Testament event. This is literal plus typical. Many of the citations in the Book of Hebrews of Exodus and Leviticus fall into this category.⁵⁴

Fruchtenbaum calls the third approach *literal plus application*.⁵⁵

This example is found in Matthew 2:17-18 which is a quotation of Jeremiah 31:15. In the original context, Jeremiah is speaking of an event soon to come as the Babylonian Captivity begins. As the Jewish young men were being taken into captivity, they went by the town of Ramah. Not too far from Ramah is where Rachel was buried and she was the symbol of Jewish motherhood. As the young men were marched toward Babylon, the Jewish mothers of Ramah came out weeping for sons they will never see again. Jeremiah pictured the scene as Rachel weeping for her children. This is the literal meaning of Jeremiah 31:15. The New Testament cannot change or reinterpret what this verse means in that context, nor does it try to do so. In this category, there is a New Testament event that has one point of similarity with the Old Testament event. The verse is quoted as an *application*. The one point of similarity between Ramah and Bethlehem is that once again Jewish mothers are weeping for sons that they will never see again and so the Old Testament passage is applied to the New Testament event. This is literal plus application. The original text may be history or prophecy. The

Jeremiah quote is an example of history. An example of prophecy is in Acts 2:16-21 which quotes Joel 2:28-32. Virtually nothing that happened in Acts 2 is predicted in Joel 2. Joel was speaking of the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on the nation of Israel in the last days. However, there was one point of similarity, an outpouring of the Holy Spirit, resulting in unusual manifestations. Acts 2 does not change or reinterpret Joel 2, nor does it deny that Joel 2 will have a literal fulfillment when the Holy Spirit will be poured out on the whole nation of Israel. It is simply applying it to a New Testament event because of one point of similarity.⁵⁶

Finally, the fourth is called *summation*:⁵⁷

The example is found in Matthew 2:23. ". . . *that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the prophets, that he should be called a Nazarene.*" However, no such statement is found anywhere in the Old Testament. Since Matthew used the plural *prophets*, one should be able to find at least two, yet there is not even one. The fourth category does not have an actual quotation as in the first three categories, but only a summary of what the prophets actually said. The plural use of *prophets* is a clue to this category. In the first century, *Nazarenes* were a people despised and rejected and the term was used to reproach and to shame (John 1:46). The prophets did teach that the Messiah would be a despised and rejected individual (e.g. Isa 53:3) and this is summarized by the term, *Nazarene*. Another example of this category is Luke 18:31-33. Using the plural for prophet again, Jesus states that the time for fulfillment has come and He states what is to be fulfilled: "the Messiah will go to Jerusalem, be turned over to the Gentiles; the Gentiles will mock Him, treat Him shamefully, spit on Him, scourge Him, and kill Him, but He will rise again the third day." Not one prophet ever said all this, but the prophets together did say all this. Hence, this is a summation.⁵⁸

Fruchtenbaum believes that every quotation of the Old Testament in the New will fit into one of these four categories. He notes that the "procedure is not simply 'to interpret the Old by the New' as Covenant Theology insists. . . . There is no need to conclude that the New Testament changes or reinterprets the Old Testament."⁵⁹ An approach such as this contributes to a consistently literal hermeneutic and demonstrates why many dispensationalists still believe that older approaches to interpretation are to be preferred. How the Old Testament is used in the New is no basis on which to abandon or modify a consistently literal hermeneutic.

FIGURES AND SYMBOLS

Critics of consistently literal interpretation sometimes contend that literalism is impossible because of the presence of figures of speech and symbols. An example is seen in a series of questions from the pen of Ken Gentry: "May not so rich a work as the Bible, dedicated to such a lofty and spiritual theme (the infinite God's redemption of

sinful man), written by many authors over 1,500 years employ a variety of literary genres? No symbols? No metaphors? No analogies?"⁶⁰ Gentry goes on to admit that dispensationalists do recognize literary devices such as figures of speech. However, he then presents the consistently literal approach of many dispensationalists as unworkable.⁶¹ By presenting the literal approach as not allowing for symbols, metaphors, and analogies, he misrepresents literal interpretation.

In light of Gentry's characterization, it is interesting to note that the most extensive work we have on figures of speech was done by the dispensational literalist, E. W. Bullinger in 1898. *Figures of Speech Used in the Bible: Explained and Illustrated* is said to have "never been duplicated or equaled in point of thoroughness and detail." "No one has done more to open the eyes of Bible students to this key than has Bullinger." It is said that Bullinger "catalogs and discusses no less than two hundred fifteen distinct figures . . . giving full explanation of its use in each instance."⁶² Bullinger's work demonstrates that literalists have at least thought about the use of figures in a detailed and sophisticated way and do not consider such usage to conflict with literalism.

SENSE AND REFERENT

Recently I came home one hot afternoon from the office and sat down to eat dinner. Still perspiring, I began putting pepper on my vegetables. My mother-in-law asked, "Is it hot?" Thinking that she was referring to the climate, I gave an answer that did not make sense to her. She then pointed out that she was referring to the pepper, not the weather. Once I understood what she referred to, I was able to answer her question. Since the meaning of *hot* has a sense that can be used in various ways, it is important to clarify to which of those ways one has referred. So it is with symbols and figures. A phrase like "white house" can relate to many different referents. One could be referring to the white house across the street from one's own house. Or one could be speaking of any house painted white in contrast to another color. One could have in mind the building in Washington, D.C., that serves as home and workplace of the president. Or one could be using "White House" as a figurative synonym for "office of the president of the United States." Building upon the basic sense of the phrase, context serves to specify possible meanings of a referent. "Sense and referent" are an important issue for biblical interpretation.⁶³

Advocates of the preterist school of interpretation (who accept that most of John's Revelation and the Olivet Discourse were fulfilled in A.D. 70 in events relating to the destruction of Jerusalem⁶⁴) give us a hermeneutical example relating to sense and referent.

In the Olivet Discourse, one of the most difficult sections for the preterist is Matthew 24:29-30. This passage speaks of the sun and moon being darkened, stars falling from the sky, the sign of the Son of Man appearing in the sky for all the world to see, and Christ "coming on the clouds of the sky with power and great glory" (v. 30). Preterists believe that these phrases do not describe a future coming of Christ; instead they believe that it refers to God's coming in judgment upon Israel in A.D. 70 through the agency of the Roman army's destruction of Jerusalem. "The sign that the Son of Man is in heaven was the smoking rubble of Jerusalem,"⁶⁵ declares Gentry. Gary DeMar

agrees: "In speaking of the sun and moon going dark and stars falling (Matt. 24:29), Jesus is describing the nation of Israel under judgment."⁶⁶ Instead of seeing Matthew 24 as the judgment of God during the future seventieth week of Daniel, preterists see it as "a providential coming of Christ in *historical judgments upon men*."⁶⁷ Gentry explains:

In the Old Testament, clouds are frequently employed as symbols of divine wrath and judgment. Often God is seen surrounded with foreboding clouds which express His unapproachable holiness and righteousness. Thus, God is poetically portrayed in certain judgment scenes as *coming in the clouds* to wreak historical vengeance upon His enemies. For example: "The burden against Egypt. Behold, the Lord rides on a swift cloud, and will come into Egypt; the idols of Egypt will totter at His presence, and the heart of Egypt will melt in its midst" (Isa. 19:1). This occurred in the Old Testament era, when the Assyrian king Esarhaddon conquered Egypt in 671 B.C. Obviously it is not to be understood as a literal riding upon a cloud, any more so than Psalm 68:4: "Sing to God, sing praises to His name; Extol Him who rides on the clouds, By His name YAH, And rejoice before Him."

The New Testament picks up this apocalyptic judgment imagery when it speaks of Christ's coming in clouds of judgment *during history*.⁶⁸

Gentry cites the following passages as support of his thesis: 2 Samuel 22:8, 10; Psalms 18:7-15; 68:4, 33; 97:2-39 (sic; Ps. 97 only has 12 verses); 104:3; Isaiah 13:9; 26:21; 30:27; Joel 2:1, 2; Micah 1:3; Nahum 1:2ff; Zephaniah 1:14-15.⁶⁹

Most likely all would agree in principle that just because various passages have a similar sense does not mean that they have the same referent. They may, but each specific instance must be verified by contextual usage. There is no question that a divine judgment sense is related by the clouds in the passages cited by Gentry. The picture of smoke, fire, clouds, and darkness gives a universal sense of the Lord's wrath. However, differences exist, which supports the view that there are at least two referents.

First, there are those passages related to the Lord's judgment of Israel's enemies on behalf of Israel. These are events that have either taken place in the past or are taking place at the time of writing, where the Lord is pictured as "riding" across the skies in a chariot of judgment (2 Sam. 22:8, 11; Pss. 18:7-15; 68:4,33; "walks," Ps. 104:3). While the other passages cited by Gentry do have a judgment theme, they do not employ the "cloud" motif and/or a nonpreterist would locate their timing at the future Day of the Lord (Isa. 13:9; 26:21; 30:27; Joel 2:1, 2; Mic. 1:3; Nah. 1:2ff; Zeph. 1:14-15).

Second, Matthew 24:30 says that "all the tribes of the earth . . . will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of the sky with power and great glory." Here we have a picture of Christ, not just riding across the sky, as in the cited Old Testament passages, but One who is "coming" from heaven to earth. The picture here is of a different event, even though elements are present that characterize all of God's judgment. It may be that the Lord is pictured as "riding" or "walking" among the clouds in smaller, local judgments. Then when the time comes for the grand finale, the Bible continues the

judgment theme depiction, but this time He actually comes to the earth in a display of visible glory and power.

Third, the preterist sees Matthew 24 as a judgment upon Israel from the Lord, who is in the clouds, through the Roman army. A close examination of the passage reveals that in Matthew 24 the Lord returns to earth to rescue His people Israel (see 24:31); the judgment is not upon Israel but upon Gentile nations that are persecuting Israel. Just because a similar sense is painted in some passages, it does not follow that all passages with that general sense refer to the same event. The figures of speech must be controlled by their specific context.

We understand that Luke 21:20-24 records Christ's reference to the A.D. 70 destruction of Jerusalem because it says "when you see Jerusalem surrounded by armies, then recognize that her desolation is at hand" (21:20). And Jerusalem is said to be "trampled underfoot by the Gentiles until the times of the Gentiles be fulfilled" (21:24). But then the language in Luke 21:25-28 (a section paralleling Matthew 24:30-34) changes to the language of God's intervention, which shifts from judgment upon Israel (as in A.D. 70 and Luke 21:20-24) to His judgment upon "the earth," where there is "dismay among nations" (*ethnon*, 21:25), and "the world" (*oikoumene*, 21:26) and to His rescue of Israel from her enemies (21:25-28). This is said to involve "signs in sun and moon and stars" (21:25).⁷⁰

Finally, preterists such as Gentry do see some passages that have "cloud language" referring to the Second Coming (Acts 1:9-11; 1 Thess. 4:13-17).⁷¹ Further, Gentry interprets 2 Thessalonians 1:7-10 as a reference to the Second Coming,⁷² when it contains many elements of judgment, such as "the Lord Jesus shall be revealed from heaven with His mighty angels in flaming fire, dealing out retribution to those who do not know God" (1:7b-8a). It would seem that the grounds he uses to argue for a past fulfillment of Matthew 24:30 could be applied to these passages also. These observations demonstrate that it is important to recognize the distinctions between sense and referent. Failure to do so may lead one to draw faulty conclusions and to overlook basic literary principles.

CONCLUSION

We suggest that it is premature to abandon, as an essential of dispensationalism, the use of a consistently literal hermeneutic that avoids changing the originally understood meaning of an earlier text. Even though the grammatical-historical hermeneutic is used by all evangelicals, many believe that only dispensationalists attempt to apply it consistently from Genesis to Revelation. Nondispensational evangelicals tend to use a grammatical-historical-*theological* hermeneutic (a mild form of spiritualization, since they replace OT Israel with the church on what they believe are NT theological grounds). At this point dispensationalists simply believe that grammatical-historical interpretation should be consistently applied.

When it comes to the role of pre-understanding, why do the critics of the older dispensational hermeneutic not invest some time examining the impact that the antirational, mystical ethos of today's culture is having on their own hermeneutical pre-understanding? To put today's skepticism in the language of a popular TV commercial,

“Why ask why?” implying that one cannot really know. Paul Karleen notes,

Poythress never questions this presupposition [covenant theology's covenant of grace]. . . . He urges the dispensationalist over and over to examine cherished assumptions. Yet he does not do the same. Is it the case that everything is open to negotiation for him but the covenant? In spite of his appeal to all of us to look at the Bible, tradition may condition his thinking far more than he suspects.⁷³

Walter Kaiser has warned,

The grammatical-historical method of exegesis has served us all very well. But in recent decades, the hue and cry has gone up from scholarship at large to allow the reader and the modern situation to have as much (or in some cases, more) to say about what a text means as has traditionally been given to the original speaker of the text. . . . Can we profit from the insights of modernity without being sucked into its vortex? This will be the question of the next years.⁷⁴

Perhaps some of the critics of the consistently literal hermeneutic (as defined in this chapter) are bothered by the certainty they see among older dispensational brethren because of the impact upon their hermeneutical pre-understanding that our modern culture represents. Today's climate is one of self-centered relativism, with no epistemological orientation to a concept of absolute truth. This mind-set is destructive of certainty and creates in people an attitude of tentativeness. While all evangelicals believe in absolute truth, perhaps modernity has eroded a valid belief in certainty that God's children can understand His Word in a detailed way.

If pre-understanding impacts thought, which it does, then it may be possible that a rejection of a consistent, literal interpretation (accepted by Ryrie and others as a *sine qua non* of dispensationalism) is less a development of dispensationalism and more reflects the adoption of a hermeneutic widely accepted outside of dispensationalism.

NOTES

¹ Charles C. Ryrie, *Dispensationalism Today* (Chicago: Moody, 1965), p. 46.

² Ryrie, *Dispensationalism Today*, p. 47.

³ Earl D. Radmacher, “The Current Status of Dispensationalism and Its Eschatology,” in *Perspectives on Evangelical Theology*, Kenneth S. Kantzer and Stanley N. Gundry, eds. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1979), p. 171.

⁴ Craig A. Blaising, “Development of Dispensationalism by Contemporary Dispensationalists,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 145, no. 579 (July-September 1988), p. 272.

⁵ Craig A. Blaising and Darrell L. Bock, “Dispensationalism, Israel and the Church: Assessment and Dialogue,” in *Dispensationalism, Israel and the Church: The Search for Definition*, Craig A. Blaising and Darrell L. Bock, eds. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), p. 380.

⁶ O. Palmer Robertson, “Hermeneutics of Continuity,” in *Continuity and Discontinuity: Perspectives on the Relationship Between the Old and New Testaments*, John S. Feinberg, ed. (Westchester, Ill.: Crossway, 1988), p. 107.

- ⁷ Kenneth L. Gentry, Jr., *He Shall Have Dominion: A Postmillennial Eschatology* (Tyler, Tex.: Institute for Christian Economics, 1992), pp. 148, 146.
- ⁸ Bernard Ramm, *Protestant Biblical Interpretation* (Boston: Wilde, 1956), pp. 89-92.
- ⁹ Ryrie, *Dispensationalism Today*, pp. 86-87.
- ¹⁰ E. R. Craven and J. P. Lange, ed., *Commentary on the Holy Scriptures: Revelation* (New York: Scribner, 1872), p. 98 (cited in Ryrie, *Dispensationalism Today*, p. 87).
- ¹¹ Vern S. Poythress, *Understanding Dispensationalists* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1987), pp. 7, 8-96
- ¹² Poythress, *Understanding Dispensationalists*, p. 78.
- ¹³ Poythress, *Understanding Dispensationalists*, pp. 82-83.
- ¹⁴ Poythress, *Understanding Dispensationalists*, pp. 83-84. Poythress (Review of Books, *Westminster Theological Journal* 55, no. 1 [Spring 1993], p. 165) dismisses Robert L. Thomas's *Revelation 1-7: An Exegetical Commentary* (Chicago: Moody, 1992) as one that "cannot be recommended" because "the over-all impact is dominated by the initial decision in favor of literalism." "This principle of 'literal if possible,'" contends Poythress, is nothing more than a "stringent idea of 'literalism,' wildly underestimating the pervasiveness of symbolism."
- ¹⁵ Poythress, *Understanding Dispensationalists*, pp. 84-85.
- ¹⁶ Poythress, *Understanding Dispensationalists*, pp. 85-86.
- ¹⁷ Poythress, *Understanding Dispensationalists*, p. 96.
- ¹⁸ Elliott E. Johnson, *Expository Hermeneutics: An Introduction* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990), p. 9.
- ¹⁹ Radmacher, "Current Status of Dispensationalism," p. 167.
- ²⁰ Ramm, *Protestant Biblical Interpretation*, p. 141 (cited in Radmacher, "Current Status of Dispensationalism," p. 167).
- ²¹ Gentry, *He Shall Have Dominion*, p. 148.
- ²² For examples of his approach, see *ibid.*, pp. 153-58.
- ²³ Gentry, *He Shall Have Dominion*, p. 153.
- ²⁴ Gentry, *He Shall Have Dominion*, p. 148.
- ²⁵ Poythress, *Understanding Dispensationalists*, p. 53.
- ²⁶ Gentry, *He Shall Have Dominion*, p. 147.
- ²⁷ For a recent presentation of a dispensational and literal hermeneutic, complete with hundreds of specific examples illustrating various principles of interpretation, see Roy B. Zuck, *Basic Bible Interpretation* (Wheaton, Ill.: Victor, 1991).
- ²⁸ I have heard these charges in a number of personal conversations with those opposed to consistent literal interpretation.
- ²⁹ David L. Cooper, *The World's Greatest Library Graphically Illustrated* (1942; Los Angeles: Biblical Research Society, 1970), p. 11.
- ³⁰ Gentry, *He Shall Have Dominion*, p. 147.
- ³¹ Greg L. Bahnsen and Kenneth L. Gentry, Jr., *House Divided: The Break-Up of Dispensational Theology* (Tyler, Tex.: Institute for Christian Economics, 1989), p. 265.
- ³² Bahnsen and Gentry, *House Divided*, p. 44 n.
- ³³ For an article-length discussion of how a literalist relates to the analogy of faith, see Elliott E. Johnson, "What I Mean By Historical-Grammatical Interpretation and How That Differs From Spiritual Interpretation," *Grace Theological Journal* 11, no. 2 (Fall 1990), pp. 157-69.
- ³⁴ Blaising, "Development of Dispensationalism," p. 272.
- ³⁵ Craig A. Blaising, "Dispensationalism: The Search for Definition," in *Dispensationalism*, Blaising and Bock, eds., p. 29. See pp. 16-34 for Blaising's discussion of the Baconian impact upon dispensationalism.
- ³⁶ Blaising and Bock, "Dispensationalism, Israel and the Church: Assessment and Dialogue," in *Dispensationalism*, Blaising and Bock, eds., p. 379.
- ³⁷ Blaising and Bock, "Dispensationalism, Israel and the Church: Assessment and Dialogue," in *Dispensationalism*, Blaising and Bock, eds., p. 379. This conclusion also appeared to be supported in personal discussion with Blaising.
- ³⁸ Blaising and Bock, "Dispensationalism, Israel and the Church: Assessment and Dialogue," in *Dispensationalism*, Blaising and Bock, eds., p. 392-93.
- ³⁹ For a presentation of Bock's position, see "The Reign of the Lord Christ" in *ibid.*, 37-67. For interaction with Bock's view, see David A. Dean, *A Study of the Enthronement of Christ in Acts 2 and 3* (Th.M. thesis, Dallas Theological Seminary, May 1992). For a recent presentation of the traditional dispensational position of an exclusively future reign of Christ in the Millennium, see Renald E. Showers, *There Really Is a Difference! A Comparison of Covenant and Dispensational Theology* (Bellmawr, N.J.: Friends of Israel, 1990), pp. 87-97. See also John F. Walvoord, *Major Bible Prophecies: 37 Crucial Prophecies That Affect You Today* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1991), pp. 96-109.

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- ⁴⁰ Blaising (“Dispensationalism: The Search for Definition,” in *Dispensationalism*, Blaising and Bock, eds., 26) contends that “Darby and Scofield approved of spiritual or allegorical interpretation of the Old Testament.” This is doubtful. Blaising may have picked up this idea from Poythress in *Understanding Dispensationalists*, pp. 22-29.
- ⁴¹ Poythress, *Understanding Dispensationalists*, p. 24 n. 1.
- ⁴² Blaising and Bock, “Dispensationalism, Israel and the Church: Assessment and Dialogue,” in *Dispensationalism*, Blaising and Bock, eds., pp. 392-93.
- ⁴³ Blaising and Bock, “Dispensationalism, Israel and the Church: Assessment and Dialogue,” in *Dispensationalism*, Blaising and Bock, eds., p. 393.
- ⁴⁴ Darrell L. Bock, “The Reign of the Lord Christ,” in *Dispensationalism*, Blaising and Bock, eds., p. 49.
- ⁴⁵ Blaising and Bock, “Dispensationalism, Israel and the Church: Assessment and Dialogue,” in *Dispensationalism*, Blaising and Bock, eds., p. 381. One cannot help but wonder how such statements can be considered compatible with several affirmations in the current Doctrinal Statement at Dallas Seminary. After listing three dispensations—Mosaic Law, the present dispensation of grace, and the future millennial kingdom—the Doctrinal Statement says, “We believe that these are distinct and are not to be intermingled or confused, as they are chronologically successive” (Article V The Dispensations). Then the Doctrinal Statement says that the church “is completely distinct from Israel” (Article xlii The Church, A Unity of Believers).
- ⁴⁶ Bock, “The Reign of the Lord Christ,” in *Dispensationalism*, Blaising and Bock, eds., p. 47.
- ⁴⁷ Blaising and Bock, “Dispensationalism, Israel and the Church: Assessment and Dialogue,” in *Dispensationalism*, Blaising and Bock, eds., p. 393.
- ⁴⁸ Gentry, *He Shall Have Dominion*, p. 156.
- ⁴⁹ Gentry, *He Shall Have Dominion*, p. 167. Gentry argues that Paul in Galatians 6:16 calls the church “spiritual Israel.” Dispensationalists see Paul’s statement “the Israel of God” as a reference to Jewish believers. For a rebuttal of Gentry’s “spiritual Israel” view, see S. Lewis Johnson, Jr., “Paul and ‘The Israel of God’: An Exegetical and Eschatological Case-Study,” in *Essays in Honor of J. Dwight Pentecost*, Stanley D. Toussaint & Charles H. Dyer, eds. (Chicago: Moody, 1986), pp. 181-96.
- ⁵⁰ Arnold G. Fruchtenbaum, *Israelology: The Missing Link in Systematic Theology*, rev. (Tustin, Calif.: Ariel Ministries, 1992), p. 842.
- ⁵¹ Fruchtenbaum picks up these classifications from David L. Cooper, *Messiah: His Historical Appearance* (Los Angeles: Biblical Research Society’ 1958), p. 74.
- ⁵² Fruchtenbaum, *Israelology*, p. 843.
- ⁵³ Cooper, *Messiah*, p. 175.
- ⁵⁴ Fruchtenbaum, *Israelology*, pp. 843–44.
- ⁵⁵ Cooper, *Messiah*, p. 176.
- ⁵⁶ Fruchtenbaum, *Israelology*, pp. 844–45.
- ⁵⁷ Cooper, *Messiah*, p. 177.
- ⁵⁸ Fruchtenbaum, *Israelology*, p. 845.
- ⁵⁹ Fruchtenbaum, *Israelology*, p. 845.
- ⁶⁰ Gentry, *He Shall Have Dominion*, p. 147.
- ⁶¹ Gentry, *He Shall Have Dominion*, p. 147–49.
- ⁶² Ethelbert W. Bullinger, *Figures of Speech Used in the Bible: Explained and Illustrated* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1968), inside flap on dust jacket.
- ⁶³ For a discussion on how “sense and reference” are involved in philosophy of language and its relation to hermeneutics, see John S. Feinberg, “Truth: Relationship of Theories of Truth to Hermeneutics,” in *Hermeneutics, Inerrancy, and the Bible*, Earl D. Radmacher and Robert D. Preus, eds. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), pp. 28-30. See also Paul D. Feinberg, “Hermeneutics of Discontinuity,” in *Continuity And Discontinuity: Perspectives on the Relationship Between the Old and New Testaments*, John S. Feinberg, ed. (Westchester, Ill.: Crossway, 1988), pp. 117-20.
- ⁶⁴ Preterist David Chilton, (*Paradise Restored: An Eschatology of Dominion* [Tyler, Tex.: Reconstruction Press, 1985], p. 166) says, “The Book of Revelation is not about the Second Coming. It is about the destruction of Israel and Christ’s victory over Rome. In fact, the word *coming* as used in the Book of Revelation *never refers to the Second Coming*.”
- ⁶⁵ Gentry, *He Shall Have Dominion*, p. 274.
- ⁶⁶ Gary DeMar, *Last Days Madness: The Folly of Trying to Predict When Christ Will Return* (Brentwood, Tenn.: Wolgemuth & Hyatt, 1991), p. 98.
- ⁶⁷ Gentry, *He Shall Have Dominion*, p. 273.
- ⁶⁸ Gentry, *He Shall Have Dominion*, pp. 273–74.
- ⁶⁹ Gentry, *He Shall Have Dominion*, pp. 273–74.

⁷⁰ For more interaction with the preterist viewpoint, see H. Wayne House and Thomas Ice, *Dominion Theology: Blessing or Curse? An Analysis of Christian Reconstructionism* (Portland: Multnomah, 1988), pp. 285-334

⁷¹ Gentry, *He Shall Have Dominion*, pp. 275–76, 279.

⁷² Gentry, *He Shall Have Dominion*, pp. 253–54, 386, 418.

⁷³ Paul S. Karleen, "Understanding Covenant Theologians: A Study in Presuppositions" *Grace Theological Journal* 10, no. 2 (Fall 1989), p. 134.

⁷⁴ Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., "An Eangelical Response," in *Dispensationalism*, Blaising and Bock, eds., p. 376.