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CONTENTS

Dispensational Features in the Gospel of Matthew.....	3
<i>Elliott E. Johnson</i>	
End of Jewish Age in Preterist Interpretations of Matthew	17
<i>Mike Stallard</i>	
Parallelism of Foreshadowing and Fulfillment: Considering Affinity and Dissimilarity in Johannine and Matthean Use of Old Testament Prophecy	37
<i>Christopher Cone</i>	
“Dispensation” Biblically Defined: A Consideration of the NT Usage of the Greek Term(s) οἰκονόμ(-ος/-ία).....	58
<i>James I. Fazio</i>	
The Postponement of the New Exodus Theory in Non-Dispensational Hermeneutics..	84
<i>Neal Cushman</i>	
Jesus as the True Vine: A Transition of Economies Announced at John 15	103
<i>Corey M. Marsh</i>	
Toward a Dispensational Missiology: Eschatological Parameters for the Global Task	141
<i>Chris Burnett</i>	
Book Reviews.....	174
Dissertations in Progress.....	207

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From the Editor's Desk

Dear Reader,

It is my pleasure once again to devote this spring issue of the JMAT to the papers that were presented at the Council for Dispensational Hermeneutics (CDH) by traditional dispensationalists from across the country hosted by Southern California Seminary, in El Cajon, CA. This year's theme covered the topic: Dispensationalism and the Gospels. These articles will enrich your mind and soul.

The new website for the Council for Dispensational Hermeneutics (CDH) can be found here: <https://dispensationalcouncil.org/>. It has a wealth of resources and news of upcoming conferences.

I would also like to introduce Dan Wiley. Dan is our new book review editor for the JMAT. Our own, Dr. Jared August, completed his PhD in New Testament at Baptist Bible Seminary last May. He and his wife, Allie have begun teaching ministries in Vermont. We wish them God's blessings in these new opportunities.

Dan is currently pastoring in Maine and is finishing up his course work in Systematic Theology in the PhD program here at BBS. Dan has been published in a number of theological journals and I count it a privilege to have him join the JMAT team. If you are interested in contributing a book review or have questions or comments, Dan can be reached at JMATreviews@clarkssummitu.edu.

At the JMAT we seek to serve our Savior, and you, our reader. I look forward to hearing from you as you profit and enjoy this issue of the JMAT.



Mark McGinniss, Ph.D.
Lead Editor

Dispensational Features in the Gospel of Matthew

Elliott E. Johnson

All of the Gospel accounts are compatible with a dispensational biblical theology. At the same time, each account has a distinctive emphasis. If the relationship between Israel and the church distinguishes between expressions of dispensationalism,² then Matthew and Luke reflect that distinction.

Matthew features a stated distinction between the two. Jesus' historic ministry was addressed to the house of Israel (10:6, 15:24). The church is introduced after that generation of Israel had rejected Jesus as the Son of David (12:23-42) and the disciples had confessed that the Son of Man is "the Messiah, the Son of the living God" (16:16). Although Israel reached into the past as the genealogy had indicated (1:1-17), the church would be built in the future. It would be built on the truth Peter confessed on behalf of the disciples. It was the truth revealed to the disciples about who Jesus is (16:17, 18). After Jesus' resurrection, he commanded the disciples to make disciples in the church based on the truths taught in the Gospel account addressed to them (28:16-20).

Luke features a continuity reflected in the remnant of believers in the Gospel account and Acts. Jesus was born in the midst of a believing remnant (1, 2). In Galilee a remnant of disciples were chosen (5:1-6:16), and this remnant then joined Jesus in the journey to Jerusalem (9:51). They shared in the journey as Jesus traveled to seek and to save the lost (15:1-32; 19:10). The remnant of believers who had come to Jerusalem

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² This distinction is more sharply expressed in the comparison between a dispensational and covenant theology.

became the remnant from with whom the church was born (Acts 1:1-2:46). “Those who believed were added to them” (Acts 2:47; 4:4; 23-37, etc.). Acts recorded the journey from Jerusalem where the church was founded (8:3) to Antioch, to Asia Minor, and to Europe. At Antioch the gospel began to be spoken to Hellenists (11:20), who, when they believed, were added to the Lord (11:24) and were called Christians (11:26). From that sending church, the Gospel spread into the Gentile world through Paul and the remnant of missionaries. So while Matthew features the distinction between Israel and the church, Luke-Acts features the continuity between Israel and the church.

πληρω is the key term in Matthew’s interpretation of the first advent of Jesus Christ. From the perspective of exposition, it features the completion of what God began in Israel’s history under Moses and the prophets. From the perspective of biblical theology, it featured the fulfillment of the dispensation of law.

As the texts are read from the perspective of speech-act understanding of language, God made commitments to Israel that remained unrealized in the closing of the Old Testament. In addition, Israel made commitments to God’s demands under law, which remained unmet. Further, during the times of the Gentiles, Israel’s experience under Gentile rule, introduced when the people of God went into captivity, remained to be resolved.

Matthew, in formula quotations, editorially commented on ten references to the Old Testament.³ Although there are OT parallels, Matthew’s formula is a development of the early Christian use of πληρω to indicate OT texts as fulfilled in the story of Jesus. As Davies and Allison note, “Neither the Dead Sea Scrolls nor rabbinic writings offer true parallels.”⁴ When the synoptic Gospels are compared, eight quotations “are not cited in the New Testament outside his Gospel.”⁵

In addition, Matthew quotes Jesus’ use of πληρω (5:17). According to Heinrich Greeven, “The goal of Jesus’ mission is

³ W. D. Davies and Dale C. Allison Jr., *Matthew 19-28*, ICC (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1997), 3:573-77.

⁴ Ibid., 574.

⁵ Ibid., 576.

fulfillment. . . . Jesus does not merely affirm that he will maintain them (the Law and the prophets) but fulfill them. As he sees it, his task is to actualize the will of God made known in the Old Testament. . . .”⁶

Thus, Matthew’s argument that distinguishes Israel from the church is clarified. Israel’s exodus and particular promises concerning Messiah are identified by fulfillment of the Old Testament’s unrealized expectation. On the other hand, the church is not mentioned in the Old Testament. Rather, its identification is forged from Peter’s testimony of who Jesus is. This truth is the foundation upon which the church will be built. So both Israel and the church share in the benefits of Jesus’ first advent ministry. For Israel, Jesus fulfilled the unfinished revelation concerning Israel found in the Old Testament. For the church, believers received the blessings of Jesus’ finished work in his first advent work.

Formula Quotations in Matthew

The first eight quotations (1:22, 23; 2:15; 2:17, 18; 2:23; 4:14-16; 8:17; 12:17-21; 13:35) explain events that were intended to fulfill what the Old Testament had prophesied about Israel or anticipated concerning Messiah. The eight quotations may be divided into two groups: the first four refer to aspects of Israel’s past to demonstrate that Jesus recapitulated Israel’s past that had been left open since the people had gone into captivity. The second four initiate first-advent ministries prophesied about Israel’s service to represent the people as the Servant. This happens as God’s purpose for his people began to be fulfilled.

Recapitulation of Israel’s Past as God’s Son

Born a Davidic King (1:22, 23)

The fulfillment of Isaiah 7:14 anticipates the theme developed in Isaiah 9:6-7 and 11:1-9. The son born is related to David, yet not fathered by David.

Ahaz was a descendent of David through Solomon (1:6, 9), yet was judged because of unbelief (Isa 7:12). That judgement

⁶ Heinrich Greeven, “πληρωω,” *TDNT* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1968), 6:294.

meant that he would not father the descendent in the line of David. Yet the virgin would conceive and bear a son according to the LORD's promise (7:14), which theme was completed in Isaiah 9:6, 7 and 11:1-9, a fulfillment of a divine-human King.

This prophesied expectation was quoted to explain Mary and Joseph's experience. Mary became pregnant as a virgin through the Holy Spirit, which Joseph discovered through a dream (1:20, 21). Joseph then legally adopted the baby as the son of David when he named him Jesus (1:25).

At the same time, his birth through the virgin Mary identified him as human, an offspring of a woman. In his generation, he was called to do battle with the serpent as Eve's seed (Gen 3:15) as he was led into the wilderness (4:2). The forty days he spent in the wilderness reminds the readers of Israel's forty years in the wilderness after they had sinned (Num 14:1-38). By contrast, Jesus did conflict with Satan who tempted him as the Son of God, but he refused to sin (3:17-4:17). Thus, in the recapitulation of a birth in David's incomplete line, a new hope was introduced according to the Davidic covenant.

Exodus from Egypt (2:15)

Hosea 11:1 spoke of Israel called out of Egypt as God's son. This statement in Hosea is not a prophetic promise, but a historic reference to the time when Israel first received God's promises (Exod 3:16, 17). It was a promise that Israel as God's son had initially realized in the exodus, but by the time of Hosea, what Israel realized had been lost. They were about to return to Gentile captivity in Assyria (Hos 7:11, 8:9, 9:5). However, Hosea also prophesied that theologically they would "return to Egypt" (Hos 8:13) "because they transgressed My Covenant" (8:1). So, Hosea 11:1 makes a statement of God's purpose for Israel my son.

Jesus' flight to Egypt positioned him where the people of Israel had begun their history. The original exodus was a type of which Jesus' exodus from Egypt as God's son would be an anti-type in the fulfillment of God's purpose for Israel. This recapitulation anticipated a final fulfillment in the representative Son, of what the LORD had promised (Exod 6:2-4). So the house of Israel could have hope in spite of the times of the Gentiles.

Sorrow of Suffering under the Times of the Gentiles (2:17-18)

While Jesus escaped Herod's fury, the infants in the region of Bethlehem were massacred. Jeremiah 31:15 spoke of Rachel's weeping for her children, when they had been invaded by Babylon. Although a remnant had returned to Jerusalem from captivity under Cyrus, yet Gentile persecution continued under Rome. It was in this sense that sorrow would be fulfilled. And that pain under Rome would be the setting for Jesus' ministry and crucifixion. The recapitulation represents the continuation of Israel's fate under Gentile rule.

An Insignificant Place in Return to the Land of Israel (2:23)

The basic recapitulation was to focus on Jesus' return to the land of Israel as Israel had first entered the land under Joshua. The particular location of Nazareth focuses on Jesus who did not return to the center of power in Jerusalem but to Nazareth. This insignificant location fulfilled the prophetic expectation that as the Servant, "A shoot (*nezer*) shall grow forth out of (Jesse's) roots" (Isa 11:1). Proverbially, nothing of significance had arisen from that environment. Nathanael would ask: "What good thing can come out of Nazareth?" (John 1:44).

In Jesus' recapitulation of events as the son of God, Jesus fulfilled purposes left open and unrealized in Israel's sinful history. Thus, Jesus was positioned to accomplish God's original plan. At this stage, a question may be raised; did Jesus intend to replace Israel or to represent Israel? The answer will be found in passages from Isaiah which Matthew quotes as fulfilled in decisions in Jesus' ministry.

Representing Israel in the Kingdom

The Great Light in the Midst of Darkness (4:14-16)

The fulfillment of Isaiah 9:1-2 continues the theme introduced in Isaiah 7:14; "a child will be born for us.... the government will be on His shoulders" (9:6). The immediate focus is on the light shining in the darkness of the "Galilee of the Gentiles." This may seem strange as Jesus had been sent to "the

lost sheep of the house of Israel” (10:6; 15:24), yet he withdrew to the darkness after John had been arrested by Rome (4:12). Zebulun and Naphtali, the two northeastern tribes of the land west of the Jordan, had been the first to be devastated and depopulated by Tiglath-Pileser (2 Kgs 15:29).

The darkness and great gloom of that region set the backdrop for Jesus’ appearance as a “great light.” He left Nazareth behind and went to live in Capernaum by the sea “along the sea road, beyond the Jordan” (4:15). So even though Jesus’ location was remote, it was strategically located near the road from the north to the south where the message could travel throughout the land.

The message, “Repent, because the kingdom of heaven had come near” (4:17), was demonstrated through miraculous tokens of heaven’s reign over evil. Thus the light showed heaven’s presence in the Davidic King (2 Sam 7:16). Disciples were called to follow (4:18-22) and numerous miracles were recorded (4:23-25). The brightness drew crowds from the whole region of Galilee, Decapolis, Jerusalem, Judea, and beyond Jordan (4:25). So Jesus, fulfilling the shining Light, laid claim to represent Israel expressing God’s reign in token form.

Servant Assumes Man’s Weakness (8:17)

Embedded in a list of miracles (8:1-9:33), Matthew takes note of the prophesied compassion of the Servant (Isa 53:4). This editorial interpretation followed the record of the healing of Peter’s mother-in-law and her neighbors at Capernaum (8:14-16); “the Servant takes the sickness that belongs to us and lifts them upon himself.”⁷ These tokens of the reign of heaven meditated through Jesus fulfilled, in each instance the prophetic promise of compassion.

Servant Brings Justice (12:17-21)

As the conclusion of Jesus’ broad-based Galilean ministry, the Pharisees began to plot to destroy him. Rather than confronting the rejection, Jesus withdrew and called his followers to do the same. That strategy was followed, so that

⁷ Edward J. Young, *The Book of Isaiah* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972), 3:345.

Isaiah 42:1-4 might be fulfilled. Two striking issues emerge from what is promised.

First, Messiah is the Servant:

The word *servant* is empathic, for it expresses the central theme. Isaiah had already identified Israel as God's servant (41:8). Why then is there a special introduction at this point of Isaiah 42? It would seem that the word is here used in a different sense from 41:8, and is not merely an identification of Israel. In particular if the prophecy is addressed to the nation, it would be unlikely that Israel is the servant... the Targum equates the servant with Messiah.⁸

The Servant of Yahweh might seem to *replace* the nation-servant, except that the servant's mission is addressed to and shared by the nation-servant. Thus the relationship is not *replacement* but *representation*. And based in the Servant's representation of Israel, the nation-servant will fulfill its role.

Second, the Servant-Messiah will proclaim and establish *justice*. It will be established in an unobtrusive and quiet manner among the nations of the whole earth. As Matthew develops this theme of justice, it refers immediately to Jesus' *withdrawal* from those who plotted against him (Matt 12:16-16). As he neared Jerusalem, it meant that he would *submit* to their plot and die (Matt 16:21). Yet he would not be overcome by the opposition but he would "be raised on the third day" (16:21). Peter objected to Jesus' submission (16:22), only to be confronted by Jesus as speaking on Satan's behalf. Peter was focused on the concerns of man, not of God (16:23). In God's concern as Jesus was on the cross, the Servant-Messiah established the foundation of justice.

Separation of Those He Represents (13:25)

The division introduced by the Pharisees in their rejection of Jesus' claim (Matt 12:14) is completed by Jesus as he spoke to the crowds in parables. Speaking in parables was prophesied by the word in Psalm 78:2. Parables can obscure the teaching unless

⁸ Ibid., 108.

one recognizes the point of comparison in the analogy (Matt 13:11). Thus Jesus' disciples came to Jesus to find out the point of comparison (13:10-17). To them and to them alone, Jesus revealed the secrets of the kingdom of heaven (13:11). The secret was that a stage of kingdom ministry would precede the establishment of the mediatorial kingdom as it had been revealed to David (2 Sam 7:16). This stage of kingdom ministry had not been revealed from the foundation of the world. This period was portrayed as seed sown on earth (13:18-23) in which both wheat and tares would take root on earth (13:24-33 and 36-43). Finally, Jesus laid claim to represent the remnant of Israel in the wheat sown.

Division among the People of Israel

Unambiguous Claim to be King (21:4-5)

The division among the people became public as Jesus entered Jerusalem (21:1-3). The entry followed in detail Zechariah 9:9 as fulfillment of his prophesied triumphant arrival. The prophecy identified Jesus' generation of Zion that would see the entrance. The entrance would be marked by a donkey, on a foal of a beast of burden. His ancestor David also rode a mule (1 Kgs 1:38). It would speak of his gentleness as the ruler who had already been introduced (12:15; 14:13; 15:21).

In support of Jesus' humble claim, "crowds who went ahead of Him and those who followed kept shouting 'Hosanna'..." (Ps 118:25, 26).

When the chief priests and scribes heard this, they were indignant at the children shouting in the temple complex. Jesus reminded them of Psalm 8:2 which spoke of the children and nursing infants praising God.

The Nation's Lack of Value for the King (27:9-10)

The value of Jesus for the chief priests was 30 pieces of silver first given to Judas to betray him. When the money was returned by a remorseful Judas, the blood money was scooped up by the chief priests to buy the potter's field. Judas had discarded the money before he committed suicide. This fulfilled what Jeremiah and Zechariah had promised (Jer 32:6-9 and Zech 11:12, 13). It became a measure of Jesus' value among "all the

people.” They would cry out later at Messiah’s crucifixion, “His blood be on us and on our children” (Matt 27:25).

Jesus Represents the People under the Law

As the ten citations have been explicated, in this perspective, the purposes of God for Messiah’s first advent have been introduced. In recapitulation, Jesus was set up as God’s son to enter the inheritance of the land and the Davidic promise. In a position of representation, Jesus chose the role to serve Israel-servant as Isaiah had prophesied about the Servant of the Lord. In this perspective, another question remained: What remained to fulfill to dispensation of Law? Matthew’s answer was expressed in Jesus’ use of πληρωω:

First, Matthew interpreted Jesus’ first advent in the framework of ten editorial comments. Davies and Allison note, “The historical characters do not speak them. These solemn formal citations of the Old Testament are introduced... to indicate Old Testament texts fulfilled in the story of Jesus.”⁹

Second, Matthew alone quotes Jesus as he introduced the second feature. “Don’t assume that I came to destroy the Law or the Prophets. I did not come to destroy but to fulfill” (Matt 5:17).

The “Law or the Prophets” provides a different emphasis than the “Mosaic covenant.” Jeremiah had already concluded that “the covenant I made with the ancestors when I took them by the hand to bring them out of Egypt—a covenant they broke...” (Jer 31:31, 32). The broken Mosaic Covenant did not need to be fulfilled but the Law included in the covenant must be fulfilled. The Law and the Prophets give expression to God’s *demands* placed upon the people. The covenant incorporates these demands expressing a formal partnership between Israel and God. Since the old partnership was broken, a new partnership (covenant) would be ratified (Jer 31:33, 34). But Israel’s responsibility assumed when they accepted the Mosaic Covenant (Exod 19:7, 8; 24:3, 7), had never been met. Thus Jesus assumes this collective responsibility as their *Representative* under Law. All that the Lord commanded he did.

⁹ Davies and Allison, *Matthew 19-28*, 574.

This position that Jesus claimed is further supported by Jesus' final comments in Matthew 5:20. If the people's righteousness was to exceed the righteousness of the scribes and the Pharisees, would this be accomplished on their own? The answer implied that that would be impossible. This impossibility further implied that there would be a righteousness made available by Jesus, the nation's *representative*. While Matthew does not develop this implication, the Old Testament had borne witness to a righteousness by faith (Gen 15:6 and Hab 2:4). Such a faith-based righteousness is neither earned as the Pharisees sought, nor deserved as the law implied. It is given by grace as Jesus' death on the cross would provide.

Fulfillment of the Law Met While Revelation of Law Continues (5:17-19)

Fulfillment of the law does not mean termination of the law. Rather it means complete satisfaction or obedience of the obligation God demanded, which the people agreed to do (Exod 19:7, 8). What God demanded is known in Jesus' exposition of the *full* and *originally* intended meaning (5:21-48). Further, it is known in what Jesus taught in addition to what he did in obedience (28:20). Both will be considered.

Jesus' assurance that the words of the law would not pass away until all were accomplished, seems to be in tension with Jesus' promise to fulfill the law. The tension can be minimized by following the clarification suggested by Douglas Moo: the meaning depends on (1) the two *untils* (until heaven and earth pass away, and until all is accomplished, 5:18), (2) the meaning of the *law*, and (3) *all things* are accomplished.¹⁰ Here is a proposed contextual interpretation of each:

- (1) Every detail demanded by the law is valid *until* the fallen world passes away,
- (2) The law remains valid until *the new covenant*, which incorporates the law, is accomplished

¹⁰ Douglas Moo, "The Law of Christ as the Fulfillment of the Law of Moses: A Modified Lutheran View," in *Five Views on Law and Gospel*, ed. Wayne Strickland et al. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan), 319-76.

- (3) The *all things* that are accomplished include Jesus' death and resurrection¹¹

Thus, the *law* includes the whole Mosaic law found in the Old Testament under which Jesus and his immediate historic hearers were responsible to live. In Jesus' final word to his disciples (28:20), the law consisted in "what Jesus commanded the disciples" as reflected in the book. This may be what Paul later refers to as the "law of Christ" (Gal 6:2), since Jesus spoke of the obligations of the commands except for the law of the Sabbath.

Jesus' Interpretation of the Law (5:21-48)

There is an antithesis in all the six expositions, which introduces a comparison. In each comparison "what they had heard" is in distinction to "what Jesus has to say." That exposition focused on God's intended meaning, fleshing out attitudes that are implied in the actions addressed in the law.

- Murder begins with anger in the heart, so reach a settlement quickly with your adversary;
- Adultery arises from lust, so whatever provides a gateway to lust must be decisively rejected;
- Divorce is permitted due to hardness of hearts for limited reasons, but with consequences that follow sin, which occasioned divorce, remain to be addressed (19:1-12);
- An oath doesn't assure truth, only truth-telling does;
- Retribution for evil ought to be replaced by *not* resisting personal loss or challenge;

¹¹ While Matthew does not consider that believers in the church which would come (16:18, 19) are not "under law," Paul does. Paul teaches that these believers are "under grace." That means that they live under the good gifts included in Christ's death and resurrection. Believers are united through Spirit baptism in Christ's death, burial, and resurrection so that they might walk in a new way of life (Romans 6:2-4). In that union with Christ, the "old man" has been crucified with Christ (Romans 6:6). As a result, "you were put to death in relation to the law through the crucified body of Messiah, so that you may belong to another—to Him who was raised from the dead—that we may bear fruit to God" (Romans 7:4).

- Love of one's neighbor ought to include an enemy neighbor as the Father treats an evil world with expressions of love.

Jesus' Obedience to the Law

In Moo's overview, Jesus:

attends the major feasts in Jerusalem, pays the half-shekel temple tax (Matt 17:24-27), wears the prescribed tassel on his robe (Matt 9:20; cf. Num 15:38-41) and, whatever may be said about his disciples' behavior (Matt 12:1-8) or his teaching never clearly violates the Sabbath (Matt 12:9-14). It is only in the case of Jesus' contacts with unclean people in his healing ministry (e.g. touching a leper, Matt 8:3) that could be considered a violation of the Law of Moses. Even in this case, however, the unusual nature of Jesus' healing activities makes it difficult to identify a clear cut violation of the Law..."

"What we have then, is a Jesus who does not go out of his way to break the traditions of his day but at the same time makes clear that he considers himself free to ignore them if need demands."¹²

Purposes of the Law

While neither Jesus nor Matthew discusses the purpose of the law, Paul's later reflection will be used. First, the demands of the law were introduced to be obeyed. Jesus stated intent was to fulfill what was meant to be obeyed. "The commandment was meant for life" (Rom 7:10), implying that life would be experienced by obedience (Lev 18:15). "Christ is the goal of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes" (Rom 10:4). So Jesus earned the right to life by obedience but surrendered that life to give eternal life to all who believe in him.

Second, "the law was our (Israel's) guardian (schoolmaster) until Christ.... But since faith has come, we (Jewish believers) are no longer under a guardian (Gal 3:24, 25). So the righteous demands of the law were intended to identify the Righteous One, Jesus Christ. So Jesus challenged his generation, "who among you can convict me of sin?" (John 8:46).

¹² Moo, "Law of Christ," 451, 452.

Third, “it is clear that no one is justified before God by law because ‘the righteous by faith will live’ (Hab 2:4). But the law is not based on faith; instead ‘the one who does these things will live by them’ (Lev 18:5). Christ has redeemed believers from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for them because it is written ‘Everyone who is hung on a tree is cursed’” (Deuteronomy 21:23) (Gal 3:11-13). Thus, the law was intended to condemn the fallen race that believers may be redeemed through the death of the Representative of Israel as God promised to Abraham, “through you all nations will be blessed” (Gen 12:3b).

Conclusion

The two governing revelations in the dispensation of law are featured in Matthew in promise and law. The law was added to promise not yet fulfilled. Matthew focuses on the climax of the dispensation by highlighting the fulfillment of the two revelations.

Matthew himself as editor uses ten fulfillment-formulas to show the relationship between the OT promise and events and teaching in Jesus’ ministry. The first four portray Jesus as recapitulating Israel’s early history from election to entrance into the land. This positioned Jesus as Israel’s representative to bring the kingdom of heaven to earth among the people. The next four citations identify Jesus as representative of Israel the servant, as Servant-King. The last two instances at the conclusion of the account contrast His divine role as King with the value the religious leaders place upon his life in his crucifixion.

On the other hand, Jesus himself claimed to be the fulfillment of the Law and the Prophets. That means that he would fully obey all of the commands, yet he died under the curse of the law as executed by the nation’s leaders. So the goal of the law was reached but the law continued to be relevant until the fallen creation is replaced by a new earth and a new heaven.

So Israel was left with an expectation for the future because Jesus fulfilled the revelation from the Old Testament as Israel’s representative son of God, Israel’s heir. In the meantime, the church, unknown in the Old Testament, would be built by Christ, resting on the truth of who Jesus is and what he did. Finally,

Israel's expected hope would be realized in Messiah's second advent as the Servant-King will reign in the kingdom of heaven come to earth.

End of Jewish Age in Preterist Interpretations of Matthew

Mike Stallard

Even though preterism has gained some traction in modern Christendom, the teaching of preterism may not be gaining much ground among Protestants in North America.³ In a recent phone survey of Protestant pastors on January 8-22, 2016, two questions surfaced the current state of affairs.⁴ First, in

This article is taken from a section of two older articles: Mike Stallard, "A Review of R. C. Sproul's *The Last Days According to Jesus: An Analysis of Moderate Preterism*," *Conservative Theological Journal* 6 (March 2002): 55-71 and "A Review of R. C. Sproul's *The Last Days According to Jesus: An Analysis of Moderate Preterism*, Part II," *Conservative Theological Journal* 6 (August 2002): 184-202. In the rework, the section on R. C. Sproul's use of Matthew to promote preterism is reproduced with some modifications for presentation at the Council on Dispensational Hermeneutics. Other tangential but important sections are included as well.

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³ For a brief summary of the history of preterist interpretation and its problems, see Randall Price, "A.D. 70: Preterism's Prophetic Dead End," *Israel My Glory* (January/February 2005): 21-22, 26; "The Rise of Preterism," *Israel My Glory* (January/February 2005): 23. Preterism comes from the Latin word for *past*. While it is possible to label views of any individual passage as to whether it happened in the past, future, or some other option, the label is used mostly to describe one's view of the end-time passages involving the tribulation period and the second coming focusing mostly on Daniel, Revelation, and the Olivet Discourse. Other books would also be important for this debate (Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Zechariah among others). The issue is whether the tribulation and second coming passages in those texts are fulfilled in the past (preterist), present (historicist), future (futurist), or in a timeless way (idealist).

⁴ The survey was sponsored by Charisma Media. The published summary I have in PowerPoint was done by LifeWay Research. I assume this is a digest of the overall survey. Of course, we all know how polls

response to the question – “when will the biblical rapture occur?” – only 1% responded as preterists. Second, in response to the query – “which view illustrates your views on Antichrist?” – 6% said they believe that the Antichrist arose as a figure in past history, the lowest of the categories. This does not mean that there has been no increase of scholarly attempts to propagate the view among Christians. Likewise, this low turnout for preterism does not suggest that futurists can ignore this doctrinal position in its defense of biblical truth. With that in mind, this case study will provide an analysis of an older work defending moderate preterism, R. C. Sproul’s *The Last Days According to Jesus*.⁵

One of the major arguments in Sproul’s presentation of preterism is that biblical teaching about the “end of the age” refers to the end of the Jewish age and not the end of the present age in which we live. In this way, the end-of-the-age passages are used to support the idea of past fulfillment in AD 70 when the Jewish age ended with the destruction of Jerusalem. He comments, “Fundamental to preterism is the contention that the phrase ‘the end of the age’ refers specifically to the end of the Jewish age and the beginning of the age of the Gentiles, or the church age.”⁶

The Parables of the Kingdom of Heaven and the Olivet Discourse

In making his presentation on this point, Sproul begins with James Stuart Russell’s exposition of the Matthew thirteen “kingdom of heaven” parables.⁷ Crucial to the preterist

sometimes mislead, mostly because of our experiences with American political polls. So we must always be cautious with such information. This poll was allegedly random and included a good cross-section of various groups. About one thousand pastors were called.

⁵ R. C. Sproul, *The Last Days According to Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998). Sproul represents moderate forms of preterism and rejects full or radical preterism as heresy since it denies the future physical resurrection of believers. He should not be caricatured as if he is a full preterist.

⁶ Ibid., 71.

⁷ James Stuart Russell (1816-1895) was a Scottish pastor in the Congregational tradition who authored the book *The Parousia: A Critical Inquiry into the New Testament Doctrine of Our Lord’s Second Coming*

viewpoint here is the fact that the so-called end-of-the-world passages speak only of an “age” or “epoch” (αἰὼνός). Therefore, in texts such as Matthew 13:39b-40 (“the harvest is the end of the age; and the reapers are angels. Therefore just as the tares are gathered up and burned with fire; so shall it be at the end of the age”), it is possible from the preterist viewpoint to see the “end of the age” as not referring to the end of the church age (or end of the tribulation), but as the end of the Jewish age with the destruction of Jerusalem and the beginning of a new (church?) age. The imagery of fire and judgment would be the visitation of God upon the nation of Israel through the Roman armies led by Titus.

There are several flaws in this handling of the phrase “end of the age” in Matthew thirteen. No futurist will deny that the term “world” or “age” refers to an epoch. However, which age or epoch is in view? Several factors in a holistic reading of Matthew lead to the conclusion that “the end of the age” refers to the end of the church age with the added future tribulation period of seven years (i.e., the time of the second coming) and not to the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70.

First, Sproul’s preterist interpretation of “end of the age” is inconsistent with the use of the term in the overall flow of biblical theology in Matthew. In Matthew, the phrase “end of the age” occurs five times: three in Matthew thirteen (13:39, 40, 49), in the opening questions of the disciples in the Olivet Discourse (24:3), and in the Great Commission (28:19-20). Although the preterist can vaguely tie 24:3 in with his interpretation of Matthew thirteen,⁸ it is much more difficult to harmonize it with 28:19-20: “Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I commanded you;

(London: Daldy, Ibister, 1878). Russell advances the view of full preterism. There is virtually no NT text that speaks of the future end-times. Even the future, physical resurrection of believers is suspect. While Sproul correctly rejects this full preterism for a more moderate view, he nonetheless uses Russell as the foil for his own presentation on many points.

⁸ The preterist makes the connection by spiritualizing the second coming description in Matthew 24:29-50.

and lo, I am with you always, *even to the end of the age* [emphasis supplied].” If the preterist were consistent, he would be forced to say that the promise of protection and the command of the Great Commission may only stand true until AD 70. Preterism could certainly fit this limitation into the scheme of Acts, which was completed before AD 70. But all of the epistles are written during the history of Acts, and from a preterist viewpoint, even the book of Revelation predates the destruction of Jerusalem.⁹ On what biblical theological grounds, then, would outreach, evangelism, and training be based? The preterist seems to be left with only “application” and no direct teaching on the matter. However, as far as this reviewer is aware, preterists are not known for this particular approach to the Great Commission.¹⁰

It is much more plausible, taken at face value, “the end of the age” refers to the end of the age we Christians now live in (counting also the tribulation to follow). Several textual indicators lead to this conclusion. One must begin by asking, “Is the parable of the sower in Matthew thirteen a discussion of the sowing that takes place *only* until AD 70?” The timing of the sowing that takes place is the same as the timing of the growing of the wheat and tares in the second parable of the chapter. The overall flow of the book of Matthew would indicate that chapter thirteen marks a turning point. In chapter twelve, there is the highlighting of significant opposition to the kingdom message of Christ on the part of the Jewish leaders. Jesus’ parables in chapter thirteen accent the fact that something new is going to

⁹ Sproul, *Last Days*, 140-41.

¹⁰ The point here is that this is a complication within the preterist system. It is possible to take the Great Commission passage in Matthew 28:19-20 as irrelevant to the church today and still maintain an outreach teaching based upon such doctrines as the body imagery and associated teachings in Pauline theology. However, such an approach is more problematic when one is a preterist since AD 70 becomes a wrap up in many respects of prior teaching. The burden of proof is on the preterist to show why each strand of teaching in the epistles has post-AD 70 application. It is this reviewer’s conviction that it is not valid theologically, even for a dispensationalist, to bifurcate automatically the teachings of the NT narratives (Gospels and Acts) from that of the epistles. One will find both continuities and discontinuities.

take place that the Jewish leaders were not expecting, namely, that there would now be a time when kingdom citizens would be raised or produced (i.e., the Gentiles) that they were not expecting to be in the kingdom. This is the mystery spoken of in the passage.¹¹ Yet the calling out of kingdom citizens, whether in the parable of the sower or in the parable of the wheat and tares, continues until the end of the age. The development of Jesus' turn to the Gentiles that begins in Matthew thirteen (recall that in Matthew ten the disciples were only sent to the house of Israel) continues with his anticipation of the church or *ecclesia* (Matt 16:18). It would seem then that the most comprehensive approach to the text is to view the term "end of the age" in Matthew 13:39-40 as a reference to the end of the future tribulation period and not the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70. In other words, the end of the age is better seen as the end of the Gentile mission and not the beginning of it as preterists would hold.

Second, Sproul's preterist interpretation cannot properly handle the phrase "end of the age" as it occurs in Matthew 24:3. The above conclusion from Matthean biblical theology is reinforced when one examines the details surrounding the phrase "end of the age" as it is used in Matthew 24:3 when the disciples asked Jesus "what will be the sign of your coming, and of the end of the age?" Contextually, the timing of the end of the age is easy to determine. The end of the age culminates with the actual second coming of Christ as described in verses 29-31:

But immediately after the tribulation of those days the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will fall from the sky, and the powers of the heavens will be shaken,

¹¹ For more detail on this particular development of the biblical theology of Matthew, see Stanley Toussaint, *Behold the King* (Portland, OR: Multnomah P, 1980) and Mike Stallard, "Hermeneutics and Matthew Thirteen, Part 1: Preliminary Hermeneutical Concerns," *The Conservative Theological Journal* 5 (August 2001): 131-54. For an exposition of the kingdom parables of Matthew 13, see Mike Stallard, "Hermeneutics and Matthew Thirteen, Part II: Exegetical Conclusions." *The Conservative Theological Journal*, 5 (December 2001): 324-59.

and then the sign of the Son of Man will appear in the sky, and then all the tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of the sky with power and great glory. And He will send forth His angels with a great trumpet and they will gather together His elect from the four winds, from one end of the sky to the other.

It is clear that all the tribes of the earth did not mourn in AD 70. There was no appearing of Jesus “in the sky.” There were no clear cosmic signs fitting this description at that time.¹² Furthermore, the language of the Son of Man “coming on the clouds of the sky with power and great glory” references the description of Daniel 7:13-14. There the Son of Man receives the everlasting kingdom from the Ancient of Days (in context, a literal, earthly, and concrete kingdom). Yet the description of the timing of this event in Daniel appears to be the destruction of the little horn coming out of the fourth empire (Dan 7:7-11) who is described in the same terms as the willful king of Daniel 11:36. The actions of this willful king continue until his destruction at a time that also leads to a literal resurrection from the dead (Dan 12:2) and the rescue of the Jewish people (Dan 12:1). These events do not harmonize at all with a preterist interpretation, which focuses on the destruction of Jerusalem (not a rescue) and must be taken in a non-literal way to fit into that particular scheme. It is far better to accept the expression “end of the age” as coinciding with the literal, future second coming of Christ.

Third, Sproul’s interpretation of the phrase “end of the age” does not take into account Jesus’ teaching on rewards, which is given in the context. This is true for occurrences of the expression in both Matthew 13:39-40 and 24:3. In Matthew 13:41-43, the end of the age is described as a time when “the righteous will shine forth as the sun in the kingdom of their

¹² Sproul does try to deal with this particular issue and actually suggests, as do most preterists, that cosmic signs did occur in conjunction with the destruction of Jerusalem. A brief section later in the article will deal with this particular issue.

Father” (v. 43).¹³ This language is consistent with the imagery of Daniel 12:3 which asserts “and those who have insight will shine brightly like the brightness of the expanse of heaven, and those who lead many to righteousness like the stars forever and ever.” It is clear, as we have seen, that the context of this Daniel passage is the final resurrection and restoration of the nation of Israel (12:1-2). Thus, the imagery of the righteous ones shining as a reward as it is cited in Matthew 13:43 is better understood as taking place at the future post-tribulational second coming and not in AD 70.

A similar conclusion can be drawn about Matthew 24:3. As part of the answer Jesus gives to the question about “the end of the age,” we find these words: “Who then is the faithful and sensible slave whom his master put in charge of his household to give them their food at the proper time? Blessed is that slave whom his master finds so doing when he comes. Truly I say to you, that he will put him in charge of all his possessions” (Matt 24:45-47; NASB). Do such words speak of temporal rewards or do they better fit the time of the second coming. Several factors point to the latter. There is the reference to the second coming in the preceding context, which we have already reviewed (Matt 24:29-31). There is the following context, which speaks of a judgment scene with rather serious words such as eternal life and eternal fire (Matt 25:41-46). Taken as a composite, all of these elements seem to fit a second coming setting more than an AD 70 temporal destruction of Jerusalem.

1 Corinthians 10:11 and the Ends of the Ages

Although this passage is not from Matthew’s Gospel, it is included in the discussion for completeness. Sproul, following Russell closely, notes that one of the most crucial passages to suggest the nearness of the last days to the apostles is 1 Corinthians 10:11, which says “Now these things happened to them as an example, and they were written for our instruction, upon whom the ends of the ages have come.” Concerning this

¹³ It is also true that the destruction of Jerusalem did not lead to the removal of “*all* stumbling blocks and those who commit lawlessness” (Matt 13:41; emphasis added).

verse in context Sproul comments, “Here is mentioned ‘the ends of the ages’ that have come upon the Jews. This text supports the thesis that “the end of the age” means “the end of the Jewish age.”¹⁴ The context of the cited passage is the rehearsing of the sins of the Israelites, which should serve and were meant to serve as a warning to the Corinthians (vv. 1-10). Does the summary of verse eleven so readily suggest the end of the Jewish age as Sproul suggests?

While there is a large body of diverse literature on this one verse and phrase, there are some things in Sproul’s interpretation that need to be checked. First, he says rather casually that the ends of the ages have come upon the Jews. The text does not clearly say this. The antecedent of “whom” (οὗς) is usually taken to be the Corinthians by way of “our” (ἡμῶν) in the phrase “our instruction.” While it is possible that the antecedent is “them” (ἐκεῖνος), i.e., the Israelites, mentioned earlier in the verse, the burden of proof is on Sproul to show why Paul’s antecedent would not be the nearest possibility in the text. There would need to be something in the context to make it plain. The only factor driving Sproul’s conclusion here may be a prior theological commitment. This possibility is reinforced by Sproul’s casual presentation of the passage without comment on the other more likely exegetical possibilities. Consequently, the idea that the end of the ages has come upon the Corinthians does not fit so nicely into a discussion of the end of the Jewish age in AD 70.

Second, Sproul quotes Russell approvingly without comment on a couple of other points where opposing viewpoints are not even discussed:

The phrase “the end of the ages”...is equivalent to “the end of the age” . . . and “the end” [*to telos*]. They all refer to the same period, viz. the close of the Jewish age, or dispensation, which was now at hand...It is sometimes said that the whole period between the incarnation and the end of the world is regarded in the New Testament as “the end of the age.” But this bears a manifest

¹⁴ Sproul, *Last Days*, 89.

incongruity in its very front. How could the *end* of a period be a long protracted duration? Especially how could it be longer than the period of which it is the end? More time has already elapsed since the incarnation than from the giving of the law to the first coming of Christ: so that, on this hypothesis, the end of the age is a great deal longer than the age itself.¹⁵

The lack of precision is evident in Russell's statement. For example, he does not even seem to notice the plural "ends" and "ages" in "ends of the ages" in his translation. Robertson and Plummer comment as follows:

'The ages' are "the successive periods in the history of humanity, and perhaps also the parallel periods for different nations and parts of the world"...In what sense have the ends of these ages reached us as their destination? 'The ends'" of them implies that each one of them is completed and summed up; and the sum-total has come down to us for whom it was intended. That would seem to mean that we reap the benefit of the experience of all these completed ages. Such an interpretation comes as a fit conclusion to a passage in which the Corinthians are exhorted to take the experiences of the Israelites as lessons for themselves.¹⁶

While it is not at all clear that Robertson and Plummer are correct in their own interpretation, their observation of the plural forms points out that the interpretation of the passage is not as simple as Russell (and Sproul) would have the reader believe. In fact, most commentators mention the fact that the phrase "ends

¹⁵ Russell, *Parousia*, 197-98. Sproul cites this passage from Russell in *Last Days*, 89-90.

¹⁶ Archibald Robertson and Alfred Plummer, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the First Epistle of St. Paul to the Corinthians*, ICC (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1911), 207. See also Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 458-59; and Anthony C. Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 743-46. The most comprehensive treatment is that of Thiselton. It is beyond the scope of this particular paper to deal with the "already" and "not yet" issues that surround discussions about this specific text.

of the ages” is an obscure one in this context. Sproul’s handling of it makes the naïve reader think 1 Corinthians 10:11 is as clear as John 3:16.

A second way in which Russell’s comment above shows imprecision is his appeal to *telos* (end) as a point-in-time termination. The word itself can be used in such a way, although it often carries with it a different nuance. Fee argues that “whichever option one takes, almost all agree that Paul’s point is that he and the Corinthians belong to the period that marks the end of the ages (translated ‘fulfillment’ in the NIV [cp. NEB]) as a way of expressing the nuance ‘goal.’”¹⁷ Many theologies argue for the present reality of the eschatological kingdom during the church age under an already/not yet scheme. Others, such as traditional dispensationalists, would see the present age as the terminal age, that is, the particular dispensation that wraps up human history before the establishment of the messianic kingdom. In general, one could argue from the context that the Corinthians were already in the era that is under consideration. Paul was asking them to correct present behavior based upon past historical examples, not based upon what was about to happen (i.e., destruction of Jerusalem in 70 A.D). In the end, there is an uncomfortable lack of precision in Sproul’s reliance upon Russell’s terse comments in dealing with what he calls one of the “crucial passages” about the nearness of the last days to the apostles.

The Start of the Church Age

One can also sense a lack of precision in another matter as he reads through *Last Days*. Recall that earlier it was seen that Sproul takes the term “end of the age” as marking off not just the end of the Jewish age, but also the beginning of the age of the Gentiles or Church Age.¹⁸ Now here we must assume that Sproul, as a Reformed theologian is talking at a different level than most covenanters do when they talk about the start of the church. Most covenant theologians believe in one people of God soteriologically and programmatically. For them, the church

¹⁷ Fee, *First Corinthians*, 459n45.

¹⁸ Sproul, *Last Days*, 71ff.

started with either Adam or Abraham.¹⁹ The church of the New Testament, the “new Israel” is either a replacement or continuation of national Israel as the people and program of God. However, granting that Sproul is talking about the start of the church in a “new or different sense” consistent with his overall Reformed theology that has its absolute start earlier, one still must ask the question: “Does the New Testament really teach the start of the church in AD 70 in *any* sense?” The answer to that question is an unqualified “No!”

Certainly the Gentile mission begins before AD 70. It appears to be going full steam under Paul’s leadership for more than two full decades before that time. Theologically, it is a relatively easy task to show also that Pauline theology teaches that the church, which is the body of Christ, is defined in terms of the baptism of the Spirit (1 Cor 12:13). But when did the baptism of the Spirit begin? In Matthew 3:11 John the Baptist says it starts in the future. Jesus in Acts 1:5 said it was future “not many days from now.” In Matthew 16:18 the church is future.²⁰ The reasonable conclusion is that Acts chapter two is the beginning of the baptism of the Spirit and the beginning of the church, which is Christ’s body. Peter later confirms this when he looks back to the time of Acts chapter two and hails it as a “beginning” of the baptism of the Spirit (Acts 11:15-16). The Bible clearly teaches then that the church along with the baptism of the Spirit begins on the Day of Pentecost following the resurrection of Jesus. It says nothing at all about the church or church age starting at the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70.²¹

¹⁹ For example, see Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1941), 570-72. Berkhof starts his survey of the church in the various dispensations with the OT patriarchs.

²⁰ The debate over the meaning of *ecclesia* in Matthew 16:18 is beyond the scope of this paper.

²¹ A corollary to this imprecision that appears in Sproul’s analysis involves the timing of the start of the messianic kingdom. Sproul is unclear as to his millennial position. In his closing comments in the book when he presents the various views, he naturally critiques premillennialism the most although throughout the entire survey he is trying to be descriptive and not prescriptive. He cites some negative concerns about the optimism of postmillennialism in a post-Christian era (*Last Days*, 202). He says nothing

What “Generation” Will Witness the End?

Perhaps the most frequently discussed text in debates between preterists and futurists is found in the Olivet Discourse. There Jesus tells his audience in the context of the parable of the fig tree, “This generation shall not pass, till all these things be fulfilled” (Matt 24:34). Sproul argues, as do most preterists, that the term “this generation” has to refer to the contemporary audience of Jesus. Thus, within the lifetime of most of them, the events described in the Olivet Discourse must be fulfilled. The most likely time related to that would be the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70 in light of the mention of the destruction of the Temple by Jesus at the beginning of the discourse (v. 1-3). It would not mean, according to the preterist, some future generation of Jews in a coming tribulation period. Sproul asks what meaning the statements would have for the original audience, if this were the case.²²

negative about amillennialism. If his position is amillennialism, then he may have a problem with his use of AD 70 as a point in time marking off the change from one age to another. Most amillennial covenant theologians start the messianic kingdom with the first advent of Christ, often targeting the ascension of Christ (which coincides with the outpouring of the Spirit on the day of Pentecost in Acts 2). See Anthony Hoekema, “Amillennialism” in *The Meaning of the Millennium: Four Views*, ed. Robert G. Clouse (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1977), 177-79; Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 351-52, 569. Berkhof is the clearest about the significance of the ascension relative to the ruling of Christ in the present age. Usually there is a coinciding of the existence of the church and the spiritual reign of Christ in the world through the church. If the church does not start until AD 70, then what does Sproul do with the ascension in his own scheme if he follows the majority, Reformed view of amillennialism? If he is postmillennial, he may be able to handle this question more easily because the options appear to be more varied and flexible in that scheme. One important feature in Sproul’s presentation, which may require analysis relative to these issues, is his conviction that the “last days” in the NT refer to the time from John the Baptist until the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70 (*Last Days*, 85-87).

²² Sproul, *Last Days*, 56-65. Sproul interacts with the view that *genea* refers to “race” or “people” such as the Jewish race. Thus, Matthew 24:36 would be a promise that the Jews would survive to see the coming of the Lord (second coming or AD 70, depending upon viewpoint). This article

Such arguments, on the surface at least, sound plausible. Other passages in Matthew that use the words “this generation” or the word “generation” seem to speak to the contemporary generation of Jesus’ time (Matt 11:16; 12:39, 41, 42, 45). The use of the word “generation” in the other Gospel accounts also seems to support this conclusion (e.g., Luke 11:50, 51; 17:25; Mark 8:38). However, the strongest passage in Sproul’s favor (in an initial reading) is one verse near the end of the preceding section to the Olivet Discourse. As Jesus wraps up his denunciation of the Pharisees, he says, “All these things shall come upon this generation” (Matt 23:36). In the context, “all these things” refers to the judgment upon the nation of Israel due to their past and continuing sins, especially their mistreatment of the prophets (vv. 29-35, cp. also v. 38: “your house is left unto you desolate”). Thus, for the futurist to change to a different future generation later in Matthew 24:34 seems to be incongruous.

What can be said from the futurist vantage point in response to these arguments? The futurist would point out that a study of the details of the text will unravel the surface reading of the preterists. *First, it must be pointed out that the word “generation” is not a technical term.* Neither is the expression “this generation.” The context must help to determine its meaning and implication in any given text. *Second, there is a clear shift to a future generation that is given by Christ himself in Matthew 23:39.* Here Jesus points to the future hope of Israel and the receiving of the Messiah by the nation. Surely, this optimism cannot fit into the preterist scheme that sees the events being described as the coming of Christ in judgment. Rather, it is much more straightforward to recognize the textually-based transition to ultimate deliverance in Matthew 23:39 and interpret the following section, Matthew 24:1ff as a description of the events leading up to that deliverance. Seen in this light, the futurist is not abandoning literal hermeneutics to suggest “this generation” in Matthew 24:34 can refer historically to a future generation that sees the future tribulation leading to the Second

will assume for sake of argument that *genea* in that passage is not used in that way. It is a popular but minority view.

coming of the Messiah. The local context governs the time-reference to the text and not any alleged global reference elsewhere. This conclusion is bolstered when one notes that there is no repentance and joy for Israel associated with the historical destruction in AD 70.²³

The generation (*genea*) of people living in that future day will see the completion of all the events. Jesus was not referring to the generation listening to him then, for he had already said the kingdom had been taken from that group (21:43). That first-century generation would experience God's judgment. But the generation that will be living at the time these signs begin to take place will live through that period and will see the Lord Jesus coming as the King of glory.²⁴

Third, the reference to "this generation" in Matthew 23:36 is tied to prior generations. In Matthew 23:35, Jesus portrays the scribes and Pharisees, i.e., the current generation, as the ones who killed the righteous from Abel to Zechariah (v. 35). In what way did the contemporary generation of Jesus' day do these awful deeds? The idea is that the current generation is simply representative of how mankind in general, and the nation of Israel in particular, had mistreated the prophets and the righteous. In light of the use of "this generation" in Matthew 23:36 to represent other generations from the past, the futurist asks why the apostles, who were Jesus' audience in the following Olivet Discourse, cannot be representative of a repentant future generation in Matthew 24:34.²⁵ There is a certain symmetry to Matthew's presentation (see figure below).

²³ Stanley D. Toussaint, "A Critique of the Preterist View of the Olivet Discourse" (Unpublished paper delivered at the Pre-Trib Study Group, Dallas, Texas, December 13, 1995), 4.

²⁴ Louis A. Barbieri, "Matthew" in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary*, NT (Wheaton, IL: Victor, 1983), 78.

²⁵ Robert Gundry comes close to exploring this line of reasoning although his reliance upon double fulfillment should be rejected (*Matthew: A Commentary on His Literary and Theological Art* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982], 490-91).



Finally, it must be pointed out that Jesus' statement to his contemporary disciples using "this generation" in Matthew 24:34 to refer to a future generation is one way of expressing an open-ended timetable. If some event could happen in Jesus' contemporary generation but might not and it could happen in a later generation at some point instead, one way to express that would be to speak to the present audience as representative of any possible generation. This way of talking would certainly not be foreign to the Jewish mindset since OT prophecies contain numerous examples of near and far elements mixed within the same prophetic train of thought (e.g., see Joel and Daniel) and they contain gaps or interludes within their fulfillment.²⁶ One of the concerns that futurists have about preterists is their lack of flexibility in predictive texts, especially the so-called "nearness" texts that are open-ended with respect to time. Perhaps their approach flows from a deficiency in understanding the way OT prophecies are presented as a background to how NT prophecies are expressed.²⁷

²⁶ See J. Randall Price, "Prophetic Postponement in Daniel 9 and Other Texts," in *Issues in Dispensationalism*, ed. John R. Master and Wesley R. Willis (Chicago: Moody, 1994), 133-65.

²⁷ For an example of how Sproul handles "nearness" texts, see *Last Days*, 85-90, 97-98. It is interesting in this discussion that Sproul appears to use the word "imminent" to mean "immediate" or "soon" and not as "an

Other Hermeneutical Considerations

Throughout the discussions in the preceding parts of this article,, the hermeneutical disagreements between Sproul's preterism and premillennialism's futurism have mostly been implicit. In this brief section, a couple of basic hermeneutical and methodological distinctions will be explicitly analyzed. First and by far the most obvious hermeneutical issue is that of *literal hermeneutics versus spiritualization of the text*. Sproul is aware of the issues in this debate. He applauds Luther's demand for a *literal sense* of the text, a sense that Sproul takes as a *literary sense*. By this he means that one "should interpret the Bible according to the manner in which it was written." In this way subjectivity would be kept to a minimum. However, Sproul adds that this approach is basically the recognition of the particular genres of the Bible. Narrative is to be read as narrative, poetry as poetry, apocalyptic as apocalyptic. There is a measure of truth to this when one understands that there is a reading of the text using the grammatical-historical approach (i.e., literal hermeneutics) that leads to genre discovery. Genre is primarily a classification and not a regulation of the text.

The real problem, however, lies in the way that Sproul uses the genre of apocalyptic to undermine a straightforward reading of the text. He acknowledges that the "graphic imagery of the events accompanying the parousia function as the chief reason many, if not most, commentators view this segment of the [Olivet] discourse as being not yet fulfilled."²⁸ He further comments "Russell and Calvin agree that the language employed in biblical prophecy is not always cold and logical as is common in the Western world, but adopts a kind of fervor common to the East."²⁹ This statement presumably sets up a discussion of allowing things in the text to be taken in a non-literal way.

any-moment event" as futurists often do (135). This makes wading through the arguments of preterists like Sproul more difficult since he seems to be using a different language in the discussion. Note that Sproul does seem to allow for near/far or primary/secondary ideas or some such dichotomy in discussing texts in some cases (189).

²⁸ Sproul, *Last Days*, 43.

²⁹ Ibid., 45.

Sproul gets to this point when he discusses the interpretation of the Olivet Discourse:

Part of the confusion concerning biblical interpretation stems from contemporary usage of the term *literal*. *Literal* today usually refers, not to the technical sense in which Luther used it, but to the interpretation of poetic images and the like as straight-forward didactic or indicative language. To take every text “literally” in this sense is not to interpret it according to the genre in which it is written, but to interpret it in a plain indicative sense. When the Olivet Discourse is subjected to such a wooden literalism, the crisis of parousia-delay is created. The cataclysmic events surrounding the parousia as predicted in the Olivet Discourse obviously did not occur “literally” in A. D. 70. Some elements of the discourse did take place “literally,” but others obviously did not.³⁰

Although it is true that people often confuse the *literal versus figurative* at the level of expressions in a text with *literal hermeneutics (grammatical-historical) versus allegory* at the level of overall approach to reading a text (a technical discussion in the field of hermeneutics), it is not at all clear that futurists are the ones who are confusing the two. The context of the discussion would suggest that Sproul is concerned about liberals, futurists, and preterists across the board as involved in the confusion. Consequently, Sproul goes on to suggest three general options for handling the Olivet Discourse:

1. Interpret everything literally with the result that some of Jesus’ predictions failed to come to pass;
2. Interpret the events surrounding the parousia as literal and the time-frame references figuratively;
3. Interpret the time-frame references literally and the events surrounding the parousia figuratively.³¹

The first option is that of many liberal higher critics. The second option, to Sproul, is where futurists are in the handling of

³⁰ Ibid., 65-66.

³¹ Ibid., 66.

the text. The third option is the preterist handling of the Olivet Discourse. However, does the second option really fit the way that most futurists handle the words of Christ in this section of Scripture?

This analysis by Sproul of futurism is a case of critique from within his own system rather than showing a real inconsistency on the part of the futurist approach from within its own system. Does the futurist really take the time-frame references figuratively? The answer is absolutely not! Sproul is assuming that his analysis of “this generation” in Matthew 24:34 is correct (see the above discussion). However, we have shown that the future time-frame reference in Matthew 24:34 is consistent with the context, both grammatically and historically. That is, the passage from a futurist interpretation made sense with respect to the language used at that time and to the historical context of the original audience as shown in the text. This is nothing more or less than literal interpretation or grammatical-historical interpretation. The futurists are literal in the Olivet Discourse taking into account any customary figures of speech. *The preterist position fails to show how futurists take the time-frame references as figurative.* In doing so, the preterist may be revealing that he is practicing his own version of “wooden literalism” with respect to the time references cited in Scripture. In actuality, he is doing so while admittedly taking the *events* of the Olivet Discourse as entirely non-literal. Sproul mentioned that most commentators see the graphic portrayal of the events in the Olivet Discourse as evidence that AD 70 is not in view. There is a reason for that. The graphic portrayal of those events, taken at face value (i.e., literally), gives a clear portrayal of a Second Coming. There is no need to look for hidden meanings.

With respect to literal hermeneutics one must also note the spiritualizing of passages that deal with the resurrection of the dead. To his credit, Sproul rejects full preterism’s spiritualizing of *all* biblical teaching concerning the resurrection of the dead.³² However, his presentation does not do full justice to the problem which moderate preterism still has with respect to various resurrection passages. For example, one cannot separate the

³² Ibid., 160-70.

details of the Olivet Discourse from the OT book of Daniel. The connection is made explicit with the reference to the Abomination of Desolation (Matt 24:15). Yet the description of the antichrist's (willful king's) last battle during the time of the tribulation period or day of the Lord's judgment (alluded to earlier) leads the reader to understand that his destruction occurs followed by the restoration of the nation of Israel and a particular resurrection from the dead (Dan 11:36-12:1-2).³³ It is hard to spiritualize the teaching on resurrection here since the text explicitly teaches a resurrection from the "dust of the earth" (Dan 12:2). Yet the moderate preterist is forced to do so in this passage in his attempt to maintain consistency in all of the related passages and to make its fulfillment take place in AD 70.

Another methodological issue is the appeal to historical similarities that Sproul often makes to establish AD 70 as the time frame for the fulfillment of passages such as the Olivet Discourse. However, the Bible interpreter cannot cite historical events as fulfilling Bible texts on the basis of mere similarities. One example will suffice to suggest an exaggeration on the part of Sproul. He cites Josephus' account of cosmic signs (stars, comets, and lights) to suggest fulfillment of the cosmic signs cited in various tribulation passages such as Matthew 24:29: "Immediately after the tribulation of those days shall the sun be darkened, and the moon shall not give her light, and the stars shall fall from heaven, and the powers of the heavens shall be shaken." Sproul even mentions that Josephus noted that many Jews had false prophetic hopes due to many of the signs. He goes on to quote Gary DeMar's discussion concerning the comet of AD 60 and Halley's Comet of AD 66.³⁴ These descriptions are all nice particulars but there is no matching of the details. In fact, the similarity is somewhat remote and timing is certainly off. What Sproul ends up with is something rather vague. Is the fulfillment of Bible prophecy dependent upon such hazy connections? The futurist maintains that prophetic *detail* will be

³³ Many (not all) dispensationalists see this particular resurrection as the resurrection of OT and tribulation saints who had died. It would be separated from the resurrection of deceased church saints, which occurs at the rapture.

³⁴ Ibid., 116-24.

fulfilled and that what is needed is *identity, not remote similarities*. Since such identity for tribulation passages has not occurred in history, the futurist expects future fulfillment for all end-time predictions.

Conclusion

As seen in this analysis, futurist dispensationalists go in a widely divergent path of interpretation than preterists when it comes to Matthew's Gospel and, indeed, the entire word of God.³⁵ From the dispensational perspective, the preterist removes the eschatological focus entirely from Matthew's emphasis on the King and the coming kingdom. This is a great loss to the church. The larger problem beyond the Gospel of Matthew is that the Christian life is left with a diminished, expectant hope for tomorrow. It is this hope that forms one of the major incentives for living life to the full at the present time. Of course, the real indicator adjudicating the difference between futurists and preterists is exegetical accuracy in the various texts and proper integration of those texts into the whole. When all is said and done, the dispensationalist has the upper hand.

³⁵ The assertion of differences with Sproul over preterism is not a statement about his spirituality. We agree about many things, just not prophetic interpretation. If someone wants to learn about the holiness of God, Sproul would be a major, positive source. I have met some preterists whom I believe to be godly men. Dispensationalists should be careful not to let their critique of doctrinal positions necessarily seep into other personal areas when it is not warranted.

Parallelism of Foreshadowing and Fulfillment: Considering Affinity and Dissimilarity in Johannine and Matthean Use of Old Testament Prophecy

Christopher Cone

In earlier research this writer proposed Johannine Parallelism of Foreshadowing and Fulfillment (JPFF) as an exegetically viable model for strongly affirming that the NT use of the OT is indeed rooted in and consistent with the literal grammatical historical hermeneutic (LGH).² The JPFF device is readily observed in John's Gospel in his usage of fulfillment language and the sign metaphor. In his Gospel, JPFF shows that John's concept of fulfillment *is more consistently the culmination of foreshadowing than it is the simple occurrence of predicted events*. One proposed advantage of this model over Thomas's Inspired *Sensus Plenior* Application (ISPA) and Cooper's Law of Double Reference (LDR) is a seemingly closer adherence to LGH. But while Thomas's ISPA and Cooper's LDR approaches are broadly applicable in understanding NT use of the OT, JPFF was examined only in the Johannine context.

The proposal for JPFF acknowledged further need of research to assess whether or not John's device for handling the OT was shared by other NT writers, and especially Matthew, since Matthew makes greater use of the OT in his Gospel than does

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² Christopher Cone, "Priority of Old Testament Literalism in New Testament Usage" in *Priority in Biblical Hermeneutics and Theological Method* (Raymore, MO: Exegetica, 2017), 83-106, originally presented to the Council on Dispensational Hermeneutics as "Johannine Parallelism of Foreshadowing and Fulfillment: Affirming the New Testament Use of Old Testament Prophecy as Uncompromisingly Literal," September 14, 2017.

John in his. This paper examines whether or not Matthew's utilization of the OT aligns with JPFF, or whether Matthew employs a different hermeneutic device (such as ISPA or LDR). If Matthew's hermeneutic is consistent with John's then we can understand Parallelism of Fulfillment and Foreshadowing (PFF) as not just Johannine, but as a device applied by those whom Jesus taught directly, applied from the earliest NT books to the most recent (spanning the entirety of NT textual history) and thus as a leading hermeneutic principle for Biblical interpretation – a foundational principle of LGH.

The scope of this paper is very narrow. It is not intended to provide a consideration of how other interlocutors have handled Matthew and particular challenges within Matthew's Gospel. Other writers have handled in some detail numerous hermeneutic approaches to Matthew, including *peshet*³ and other typological considerations⁴ but these largely appeal to external factors to derive hermeneutic understanding. Swiss theologian Ulrich Luz, for example, concludes especially from his handling of Matthean fulfillment passages that,

Matthew's Gospel is a Jesus story with double meaning Matthew has introduced a large number of fulfillment quotations in the prologue. ... Matthew's two-level story of Jesus seeks to ... give the community a new perspective based on Jesus.... It can thus

³ The limitations of *peshet* applications to NT interpretation is underscored by George Brooke, and remind us that *peshet* is ultimately not (at least exclusively) a *biblical* hermeneutic model: "Once Qumran biblical interpretation has been set in a broader context, it becomes clearer that there is little that is distinctive about its methodology ... it is ... likely that we should see some Qumran interpretation as a postbiblical phenomenon, needing to be described in non-biblical terminology. [Midrash terminology] encourages one to think of Qumran biblical interpretation in terms of later Jewish exegetical traditions." (George Brooke, "Biblical Interpretation at Qumran" in *The Bible and The Dead Sea Scrolls*, ed. James Charworth, . [Waco, TX: Baylor UP, 2006], 294).

⁴ E.g., J. R. Kirk, "Conceptualizing Fulfillment in Matthew," *TynBul* 59, no. 1 (2008): 77-98.

be said that Matthew, like Mark, has not written a biography but a fictional narrative.⁵

Luz's process and conclusion evidence the role of consistency in hermeneutic approach to NT historical narrative.

Method, and not merely content (unless the method is derived exclusively from the content) determines interpretive outcomes. Consequently, the focus here is on looking *only* at the internal data itself from Matthew and from the sources he directly references in order to examine whether the PFF device is as exegetically evident in Matthew as it is in John's writing. This article provides a textual evaluation and argument, with a view to determining the relevance of PFF to the Matthean text, either distinguishing Matthew's writing from John's, or highlighting the similarity between the two. In so doing, this is a needed test of PFF as an integral component of LGH.

Three Models

It is historically evident that LGH is the monolithic hermeneutic and primary methodological aspect of *sine qua non* for traditional dispensational thought. In the vast majority of Scriptures, this approach is easily applied and understood. Still, there are some contexts offering a degree of complexity that necessitates a more precise definition of what LGH actually is and how it functions. The NT use of the OT is one such demanding area—particularly in those passages that claim fulfillment through NT events of OT prophecies or events. Regarding some of these instances, it has been argued that NT writers do not restrict their interpretive usage to faithful application of the principle of single meaning. Some of those assertions have admittedly departed from LGH altogether,⁶ while Robert Thomas's ISPA and David Cooper's LDR are two explanatory devices proposed within LGH framework and have been well received within traditional dispensational thought.

⁵ Ulrich Luz, *Studies in Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 14, 16, and 61.

⁶ See Appendix to "Priority of Old Testament Literalism in New Testament Usage" for more discussion and examples.

These two models suggest that seemingly non-literal interpretations of OT prophecy by NT authors do in fact fit within the framework of literal grammatical historical understanding.

Although Thomas recognizes that in many instances the NT writer employs LGH and goes no further, there are instances in which Thomas perceives the divine application of double meaning. Thomas describes the subtleties of his ISPA understanding as follows:

Does not the NT's assigning of an application based on a second meaning to an OT passage violate that principle? That the passage has two meanings is obvious, but only one of those meanings derives from a grammatical-historical interpretation of the OT itself. The other comes from a grammatical-historical analysis of the NT passage that cites it. The authority for the second meaning of the OT passage is not the OT; it is the NT. The OT produces only the literal meaning. The *sensus plenior* meaning emerges only after an ISPA of the OT wording to a new situation. The NT writers could assign such new meanings authoritatively because of the inspiration of what they wrote.⁷

In Thomas's view, in these instances the biblical writers introduce new meanings to the OT, not based on OT exegesis, but based on new revelation provided in the NT text. Thus there is a single meaning of the OT text, and then an additional meaning of the OT text that is revealed through the NT counterpart.

Offering another approach to the apparently additional or different meanings inferred from NT handling of the OT, David Cooper's LDR is "the principle of associating similar or related ideas which are usually separated from one another by long periods of time, and which are blended into a single picture like the blending of pictures by a stereopticon."⁸ Cooper sees LDR

⁷ Robert L. Thomas, "The New Testament Use of the Old Testament," in *The Masters Seminary Journal*, 13, no.1 (Spring 2002): 80.

⁸ David L. Cooper and Burl Haynie, "The Fifth Law: The Law of Double Reference" in *Rules of Interpretation: Articles from Biblical*

epitomized in Psalm 16:8-11, as he notes that in these verses David was not speaking of his own experiences, but was rather speaking prophetically of the Messiah. In this context, according to LDR, David is moving from personal to prophetic (hence the double reference).

While both of these methods provide advantages in explaining difficult nuances within LGH, neither explanation is particularly satisfying to this writer. ISPA requires a divinely allowable double meaning in order to address hermeneutic challenges. It demands carefully targeted and divinely allowed violation of normative and longstanding hermeneutic principles in order to provide a set of new principles for NT interpretation. It would seem simpler and more consistent if the text did not vary from the long-tested principle of single meaning. The question here is whether there is a simpler and more consistent approach – and ultimately whether that approach is biblical or not. ISPA has advantages, but adds complexity, perhaps unnecessarily.

LDR also provides explanatory value, but likewise adds complexity. Whereas ISPA retains a high degree of objectivity in interpretation, LDR infuses the process with subjectivity – particularly in determining when the text is referring to the near versus the far reference.

Psalm 16:8-11 illustrates the challenge: if at some point the antecedent is different, there is no signifier in the immediate context, so accuracy in this type of interpretation cannot be certain until Peter's later commentary, recorded in Acts 2:25-31, roughly one thousand years later. This kind of uncertainty does not fit the biblical hermeneutic precedent of the earlier three thousand years. Again, it seems that Biblical simplicity demands a different approach.

A third model is observed in John's Gospel, and has been referred to by this writer as Johannine Parallelism of Foreshadowing and Fulfillment (JPFF). JPFF is asserted to more strongly affirm that the NT use of the OT is rooted in and consistent with LGH. In essence, the device is observed in John's usage of *fulfillment* language and *sign* metaphor. Rather than

fulfillment in the ISPA sense (with meaning added later) or in the LDR sense (with clarity of meaning added later), John's concept of fulfillment *is more consistently the culmination of foreshadowing than it is the simple occurrence of predicted events*. While sharing advantages of ISPA and LDR, JPFF also addresses the most significant difficulties shared by ISPA and LDR (complexity and inconsistency) and in so doing may provide a stronger affirmation that the NT use of the OT is fully compatible with the literal grammatical historical hermeneutic.

Summarizing Johannine Parallelism of Foreshadowing and Fulfillment

While some of John's references to fulfillment are connected to predictive prophecy,⁹ the references John cites as fulfilled are most often not overtly predictive.¹⁰ They typically contain no internal signifiers of being directly predictive. In their application to Jesus it is evident that they were foreshadowing or illustrative of something that would take place in Jesus' context. In light of these fulfillments of non-predictive prophecy, it is evident that John is using fulfillment (πληρώω) and completion (τελειωθῆναι) as closely synonymous.¹¹ He doesn't indicate any changed or augmented meaning of the OT referent, but rather John assigns purpose to the OT passage. Psalm 69:21 was not complete until something similar or identical happened to Jesus.

Exodus 12:46 illustrates similarly: the Passover lamb was to have no broken bones. The requirement was not accompanied by any prediction, yet, the Scripture was not complete until the Messiah died as the Passover Lamb with no broken bones, as recorded in John 19:36. This was not the happening of a predicted event, rather it was the fulfillment of a sign. The recipients of the OT passage were able to obey the prescription, though they might not have fully understood why. John connects the event of Jesus' death with the prescription, thus showing that this aspect of Jesus' death was anticipated and in God's plan all along.

⁹ John 12:38, referencing Isaiah 53:1.

¹⁰ E.g., John 13:18, 15:25, 19:24, referencing Psalm 41:9, 35:15, 69:4, and 22:18.

¹¹ E.g., John 19:28, referencing Psalm 69:21.

Normative LGH is applied in both the OT and NT contexts, and there is no evolution of the hermeneutic from Moses to John.

Additionally, John utilizes the term σημεῖον seventeen times, as narrative markers, not as ends in themselves, but as devices employed to foster belief. “Even though the signs were actual happenings that are communicated via single meaning, they were illustrative—manifestations—of the glory of the Messiah. This is a vital principle in the JPFF model for understanding NT use of the OT: *there was no metaphor involved in the communication of these events, yet the events themselves were metaphor designed to invoke a response.*”¹² These literal events served as metaphor, illustrating the divinity and identity of the Messiah. They demonstrated a scriptural, Messianic expectation and fulfillment, and a parallelism between the miracles, signs, and truths embodied in Christ.

He is the antecedent that the events were designed to unveil. The miracles were events that literally happened and were communicated literally, but they were illustrative of something much greater: *Him*. And it is with this concept of the *parallelism of foreshadowing and fulfillment* in mind that we can understand John’s use of the OT in a fulfillment context. ... Sometimes John identifies fulfillment as a happening of a predicted event. Sometimes he presents fulfillment as the culmination of a foreshadowing. Sometimes that foreshadowing is specifically quoted from the OT, other times it is more general and not tied to a particular passage. But in every Johannine fulfillment context, there is no hermeneutic adjustment of OT meaning for the NT usage, nor is there any hint of a shift from plain and single meaning.¹³

The parallelism evident in John’s writing between the anticipated metaphor and the literal realization underscore the advantage of JPFF over ISPA and LDR. Where ISPA and LDR are assuming changes in meaning and trying to justify those with LGH, JPFF acknowledges a set and unchanged meaning with

¹² Cone, *Priority*, 97.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 101.

augmented *usage*. Whereas *meaning* is within the purview of hermeneutics, *usage* belongs to the realm of the aesthetic. JPFF is faithful to LGH, while pointing the reader to God's broader aesthetic¹⁴ purposes.

Testing the Device in Matthean Usage

While John's parallelism of foreshadowing and fulfillment (PFF) is evident in his Gospel, his writing style is distinct enough from the Synoptics and other NT books that one might not be surprised if the PFF device was uniquely Johannine. However, if the device is employed by other writers, then perhaps it ought to be recognized as a fundamental aspect of Biblical LGH handling of prophetic material. To examine whether or not PFF has broader usage than simply Johannine, it is helpful to examine especially the NT books that heavily utilize the OT, particularly with respect to fulfillment. Ninety-two times the lemmas πληρώ¹⁵ and ἀναπληρώ¹⁶ appear in the Greek New Testament.¹⁷ The NT books can be ranked based on the number of times the terms are employed in each book:

- 17 – Matthew
- 16 – Acts
- 15 – John
- 9 – Luke
- 6 – Romans
- 4 – Ephesians
- 5 – Philippians
- 4 – Colossians
- 4 – 2 Corinthians
- 2 – Mark

¹⁴ The term *aesthetic* in this context is intended to describe God's broad doxological purpose as an expression of His glory, revealed in Scripture as an overarching plan directing all of history.

¹⁵ Eighty-six instances.

¹⁶ Six instances.

¹⁷ There are other closely related words used in the NT, including πληροφωρέω, and ἐκπληρώ, but these are not considered here because neither are used by Matthew.

- 2 – Revelation
- 2 – Galatians
- 1 – 1 Thessalonians
- 1 – 2 Thessalonians
- 1 – 2 Timothy
- 1 – James
- 1 – 1 John
- 1 – 2 John

It is worth noting that more than half of all NT instances of πληρώ are found in three books: Matthew, Acts, and John. As the inaugural NT book,¹⁸ and the book in which the most instances occur, Matthew sets a transparent standard for the NT use of the term, so we begin with an assessment of the seventeen instances in Matthew to evaluate whether or not he utilizes PFF, in order to help us determine the validity of PFF as a fundamental LGH device.

In Matthew there are sixteen instances of πληρώ, and one instance of ἀναπληρώ, and three different types of usages of the terms.¹⁹ Type 1 is the general use of the term, not directly related to prophecy, but still relevant because it shows that fulfillment can be broader than simply the happening of a predicted event. Type 2 is fulfillment of prophetic material that was originally given with internal signifiers of prediction. Type 3 is fulfillment of prophetic material that was originally given without internal signifiers of prediction.

¹⁸ Eusebius, *Church History*, trans. Arthur Cushman McGiffert, *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Second Series*, vol. 1, ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace. (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing 1890), bk. III, chap. 24. Revised and edited for New Advent by Kevin Knight, <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/250103.htm>.

¹⁹ There is also one instance of ἀποδίδωμι in 5:33 (translated “fulfilled” in the NASB), which is not discussed here as the word is not directly connected to πληρώ/ ἀναπληρώ.

Four Type 1 Instances (Not Directly Related to Prophecy)

There are four of the general non-prophetic Type 1 instances in Matthew. The first is in 3:15: “But Jesus answering said to him, ‘Permit *it* at this time; for in this way it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness.’ Then he permitted Him.” This is not a prophecy reference, but is still significant in that it shows that the semantic range of the term extends beyond simple happenings of predicted events. The term here has the sense of *completing* or *filling up*. Matthew 5:17 records Jesus’ admonition: “Do not think that I came to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I did not come to abolish but to fulfill.” The contrast here between *abolish* (καταλύω) and *fulfill* shows further range of πληρώω. Whereas καταλύω is to completely invalidate, πληρώω in this context indicates complete validation. In 13:48 is recorded Jesus’ analogy of the kingdom of the heavens as a dragnet, with πληρώω used in its most basic sense of *being filled*. The final Type 1 reference in Matthew is in 23:32, Jesus’ indictment of the scribes and Pharisees that they should “fill up, then, the measure *of the guilt* of your fathers.” This reference uses πληρώω in the sense of *completion*. These four references provide an internal indicator of the semantic range of πληρώω in Matthew as being broader than simple predictive fulfillment. This is important as we consider the other two types of usage in Matthew.

Ten Type 2 Instances (Fulfillment w/ Prediction Signifiers)

There are ten Type 2 instances referencing specific prophecy with internal signifiers of prediction. The first, in Matthew 1:22-23 refers to Isaiah 7:14:

Now all this took place to fulfill what was spoken by the Lord through the prophet: “Behold, the virgin shall be with child and shall bear a Son, and they shall call His name Immanuel,” which translated means, “God with us.”

Isaiah 7:10-16 describes the Lord giving Ahaz a sign (Heb אִימָנוּ, Grk LXX σημειον) that before a child would grow old

enough to choose good over evil, the kings of Damascus and Samaria, who were oppressing Judah, would be defeated (7:16). There appears a literal happening of that predicted event in 8:3-4, with two substantial differences. First, the prophetic sign is not a virgin *per se*, as Isaiah approached her and she conceived. The Hebrew term **עַלְמָה** does not require virginity, having a semantic range that can include a maiden or a newly married woman. The second difference is between the name predicted (**עֲמֹנוֹ אֵל**) and the name that was actually given (**מַהֲרֵר שְׁלֵל חֶשֶׁב בֶּזַי**).

Because the *sign* terminology was employed, we may understand that the sign itself was figurative (much like John's use of *σημεῖον* in Rev 12:1). It is worth noting that the 7:14 prediction speaks of what *she* would call the boy, whereas the immediate context apparent fulfillment speaks of what God told Isaiah to call the boy. With these two considerations, we could certainly understand 8:3-4 as a literal happening of a predicted event. If that be the case, then Matthew's usage would not reflect the happening of a predicted event, but rather an instance of PFF. If so, Matthew is using the event as a *foreshadowing*²⁰ of a later deliverance that would come by the birth of a boy who would be born of a virgin (in the most restrictive sense). Notice that Matthew does not include the refusing evil, choosing good, or the specific deliverance from the two kings in his reference. It seems clear (especially in light of those omissions) that Matthew is observing the virgin birth of Christ and the aspect that God is with us, as a fulfillment in the sense of completing the purpose for the original sign.

In 2:23 we encounter another instance of fulfillment language: "and [Jesus] came and lived in a city called Nazareth. *This was* to fulfill what was spoken through the prophets: "He shall be called a Nazarene." This passage is a bit less clear, as there is no specific OT prophecy that includes the term *Ναζωραῖος* (in the LXX). However, the term could simply be a

²⁰ The term *foreshadowing* is used to reflect the divine author's intent beforehand that the OT passages referenced by the NT author would serve as illustrative of later NT events. These instances go beyond allusion in their specificity.

near-transliteration of the Hebrew נֶצֶר (translated *branch*), which was attributed to the coming Messiah by several of the prophets.²¹ Matthew notes that Jesus' specific hometown was specifically chosen for the purpose (ὅπως) of fulfilling what the prophets said. If Matthew intends to communicate a prediction and happening, then he must be referencing extra-biblical prophecy, as the TaNaKh records no such prediction. But a simpler and more likely explanation, in this writer's estimation, would be that he is simply employing PFF – that Jesus' hometown was an aesthetic affirmation of His identity. He was the prophesied *Nazar*, and it would be aesthetically fitting for him to come from *Nazareth* (the hometown of Joseph and Mary, both in the line of Jesse).²² Peter's comment in Acts 10:38 seems to support the idea that Matthew was presenting a foreshadowing and fulfillment, as Peter alludes to Isaiah 11:1-2 (Jesus as the branch) and calls him "Jesus of Nazareth." It is notable that in all of Peter's recorded preaching and teaching, the only time he ever referred to Jesus as "Jesus of Nazareth," he does so in this immediate context of Jesus being anointed with the Holy Spirit – both concepts (Jesus as branch, and as anointed with the Spirit) are mentioned together in Isaiah 11:1-2. Peter connects Jesus' hometown with Isaiah 11:1-2—just like Matthew seems to do.

Whereas 2:23 celebrated Jesus' connection to Nazareth, 4:13-16 describes his northern ministry as fulfilling Isaiah 9:1-2:

and leaving Nazareth, He came and settled in Capernaum, which is by the sea, in the region of Zebulun and Naphtali. *This was* to fulfill what was spoken through Isaiah the prophet: "The land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, By the way of the sea, beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles—"The people who were sitting in darkness saw a great Light, And those who were sitting in the land and shadow of death, Upon them a Light dawned."

Isaiah 9:1-7 provides a glimpse of the future Messianic hope, not just for the southern region of Judah, but also for the northern tribes of Zebulun and Naphtali and beyond to Galilee. This would

²¹ E.g., Isaiah 4:2, 11:1; Jeremiah 23:5, 33:15; Zechariah 3:8, 6:12.

²² Luke 1:26, 2:4, 4:16.

be a comprehensive hope that wouldn't touch just one area, but would impact Judah, Israel, and the Gentiles. The prediction signifiers show no immediate-context happening, and the passage speaks of a Messianic hope centered on the child who would be Prince of Peace.²³ Because there is no changed or augmented meaning, and there is no intermediate or near-term happening that fit the prediction, this seems clearly a Messianic prediction fulfilled in Jesus. In this instance, the fulfillment is simply prediction/happening. Neither ISPA, LDR, or PFF is in view here.

Matthew 8:17 has a more apparent prediction/happening parallel from Isaiah 53:4.²⁴ In Matthew 8:14-16 we encounter Jesus healing Peter's mother in law, casting out demons, and healing the sick. Matthew says that, "*This was to fulfill what was spoken through Isaiah the prophet: "He Himself took our infirmities and carried away our diseases."*

Again, in 12:15-16, Jesus was healing those who were following him, and telling them not to make him known. Matthew uses the ἵνα purpose clause in 12:17 to show the purpose of the healing and the warning (against making him known) was to fulfill Isaiah 42:1-4:

This was to fulfill what was spoken through Isaiah the prophet: "Behold, My Servant whom I have chosen; My Beloved in whom My soul is well-pleased; I will put My Spirit upon Him, And He shall proclaim justice to the Gentiles. "He will not quarrel, nor cry out; Nor will anyone hear His voice in the streets. "A battered reed He will not break off, And a smoldering wick He will not put out, Until He leads justice to victory. "And in His name the Gentiles will hope."

The healing was made possible by his identity and empowerment by the Father through the Spirit (12:18), and it appears that the warning not to make him known at that point may have been related his not asserting himself until "he established justice in the earth." Like 8:17, this appears to be a

²³ Isaiah 9:6.

²⁴ Isaiah 53:3 in the LXX.

prediction/happening parallel. Like John, who employs both PFF and prediction/happening in his Gospel, Matthew shows that he also understands the difference between the two aspects of fulfillment, and recognizes that fulfillment is a broader concept than simply the happening of predicted events.

In 13:14 we encounter the lone instance of ἀναπληρώ in Matthew:

In their case the prophecy of Isaiah is being fulfilled, which says, ‘You will keep on hearing, but will not understand; You will keep on seeing, but will not perceive; For the heart of this people has become dull, With their ears they scarcely hear, And they have closed their eyes, Otherwise they would see with their eyes, Hear with their ears, And understand with their heart and return, And I would heal them.’

Here Jesus quotes Isaiah 6:9-10, which seems to characterize the response to Isaiah’s ministry, in light of the near-term judgment and remnant of 6:11-13. There are two apparent possibilities here regarding how Jesus was employing the Isaiah 6 prophecy. Either Jesus is employing PFF (as the predictions had already had representative occurrences in Isaiah’s lifetime), or Jesus is using ἀναπληρώ as “again fulfilled” which might imply an instance of LDR.

Cooper and Fruchtenbaum are careful to distinguish LDR from double fulfillment,²⁵ so that understanding of ἀναπληρώ as “again fulfilled” would not be particularly compatible with LDR. If the reader is to understand ἀναπληρώ in that way, then it seems double fulfillment (not LDR) is in view. Even if that were the case, a double fulfillment in this kind of context would not need to be seen as non-literal, if the term ἀναπληρώ suggested a second literal occurrence of a predicted event. However, this kind of reading seems untenable, as none of the

²⁵ Arnold Fruchtenbaum, *Footsteps of the Messiah* (Ariel Ministries, 2003), 4-5.

other NT usages of ἀναπληρώω allow for an again fulfillment.²⁶ It is more likely that Matthew 13:14 is an instance of PFF, with the earlier Israelite response to Isaiah being a foreshadowing of response to Messianic parabolic teaching. If this be so, it provides evidence that Jesus distinguished between the two major types of fulfillment (prediction/happening and PFF), and that he recognizes the legitimacy of both.²⁷

In 13:34 we see a shift in Jesus' ministry. Prior to his rejection on the part of the leaders, he taught openly and plainly, but post-rejection he used the literary device of parable—not for the purpose of making things clearer, but for making them more difficult to understand:

All these things Jesus spoke to the crowds in parables, and He did not speak to them without a parable. *This was* to fulfill what was spoken through the prophet: "I will open My mouth in parables; I will utter things hidden since the foundation of the world."

This is a quotation of Psalm 78:2, written by Asaph, who is clearly speaking of himself as the parabolic speaker. He adds a first person plural reference to "our fathers,"²⁸ and refers to Yahweh in the third person.²⁹ While Asaph says he "will open his mouth,"³⁰ and he does so in the following verses, telling the parable or the story of God's faithfulness to Israel. While there is prediction language, there is also a happening of the predicted event in the immediate context. Yet, still, Matthew uses this statement as a foreshadowing of Jesus' own parabolic communication, and characterizes Asaph's statement as fulfilled or completed in Jesus' speech. This instance illustrates that not only does Matthew distinguish between prediction/happening and PFF, but he also can combine the two – he can use a

²⁶ 1 Corinthians 14:16; 16:17, Galatians 6:2; Philippians 2:30; and 1 Thess 2:16 all use ἀναπληρώω to refer to basic filling or completion.

²⁷ Compare with Matthew 26:31, 54, 56.

²⁸ Psalm 78:4.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Heb הִפְתִּי־פִי [Qal imperfect], Grk LXX ἀνοίξω, [future active indicative].

prediction that had already taken place as a foreshadowing of a later event. He doesn't change or augment the meaning, but rather he *utilizes* the OT passage in an aesthetic way to emphasize that Jesus' ministry is prefigured or foreshadowed in OT contexts.

The seventh instance of πληρώ appears in 21:4-5:

This took place to fulfill what was spoken through the prophet: "Say to the daughter of Zion, 'Behold your King is coming to you, Gentle, and mounted on a donkey, Even on a colt, the foal of a beast of burden.'"

Here, Matthew paraphrases Zechariah 9:9, which speaks of Messianic hope. Interestingly, Matthew does not include the affirmation that the king would be righteous and would bring salvation. He seems focused only on the lines that were predicted which were happening because of the instructions Jesus gave to his disciples to acquire the colt of a donkey. This seems a prediction/happening. If it were an instance of PFF, it would seem that Matthew would have more comprehensively addressed the aspect of Messiah's righteousness.

The penultimate instance of πληρώ is found in 26:54, with no direct OT referent in the near context:

Then Jesus said to him, "Put your sword back into its place; for all those who take up the sword shall perish by the sword. "Or do you think that I cannot appeal to My Father, and He will at once put at My disposal more than twelve legions of angels? "How then will the Scriptures be fulfilled, *which say* that it must happen this way?"

Jesus does offer a prediction in 24:31 that his disciples would fall away from him, and he offers as evidence Zechariah 13:7, expecting a literal occurrence to take place that very night. If Peter did not put his sword away, then perhaps a conflict would have ensued which would have resulted in a short-lived avoidance of the Shepherd being struck down. Jesus did not intend that, nor see that as fitting in light of the OT prediction. But it seems that Jesus has a bigger picture in view, though it is

not clear whether He was thinking of specific aesthetic completion of PFF, or simply Messianic predictions and happenings.

Again, in Matthew 26:56, Jesus makes reference to predictions being fulfilled, noting that “all this has taken place to fulfill the Scriptures of the prophets.” In this last reference to fulfillment, Jesus acknowledges a completion without any specific OT referent, whereas he also not specific fulfillment in 26:31. The other instances we have examined so far have been presented by Matthew, the writer. But these last two prophetic interpretations are especially helpful in this discussion, since they are Jesus’ direct words, and not simply Matthew’s commentary (inspiration notwithstanding). In this final completion-symmetry, Jesus seems to distinguish between prediction and happening and the broader PFF. In both the fulfillment instances of 26:54 and 56 Jesus references the Scriptures (γραφαὶ) in the plural, versus the single reference quoted in 36:31.

Of the ten references that include or imply prediction signifiers, five record prediction/happenings (4:14-16, 8:17, 12:15-16, 21:4, 26:54), and five seem to be instances of PFF (1:22-23, 2:23, 13:14, 34, 26:56), though one of those is not specific enough for us to categorize definitively (26:56). None need be seen as ISPA or LDR, as both of those devices perceive change or addition in the NT rendering from the OT introduction, and additional or changed meaning are not apparent in any of these instances.

Four Type 3 Instances (Fulfillment w/o Prediction Signifiers)

There are three Type 3 instances in Matthew. These reference fulfillment of specific prophecies that were originally given without internal signifiers of prediction. The first is in 2:15 and quotes Hosea 11:1:

He remained there until the death of Herod. *This was* to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet: “Out of Egypt I called My Son.”

Hosea 11:1 references Israel's early youthful days, followed by days of idolatry with the Baals. This fits with the simple timeline of Israel's history. This is not an instance of prediction/happening, as there is no prediction in the OT context. Nor does it seem to be either ISPA or LDR, as there is no change in meaning or application of the OT referent *if* the earlier event was simply a foreshadowing or illustration of the future event which would fulfill the purpose of the earlier event. In this case, there are parallels between Israel and Messiah—they were both referenced as sons, and they were both protected and delivered from Egypt. There is an aesthetic symmetry evident here that neither changes the meaning of nor allegorizes the text, but which offers *an application* of the earlier text to complete a broader picture.

Similarly, Matthew 2:17 quotes Jeremiah 31:15—a statement within a near-term judgment context. Matthew observes the prophecy is fulfilled in the genocide of Herod, who was trying to destroy the prophesied Jewish King:

Then what had been spoken through Jeremiah the prophet was fulfilled: “A voice was heard in Ramah, Weeping and great mourning, Rachel weeping for her children; And she refused to be comforted, Because they were no more.”

In the context of Jeremiah 31:15 Israel was anticipating an imminent judgment (hence the weeping of Rachel), but one that would be followed by restoration and “return from the land of the enemy.”³¹ In both situations, there was judgment to the point of near-death (first by God, then by Herod), and there was restoration (first by God, then also by God, in delivering Jesus from the murderous attempt by Herod). This is very much in line with other instances of PFF: the earlier referent is completed by the later antecedent, and the two are connected by more than one parallel.

The final instance is in Matthew 27:9-10, as Matthew attributes a saying to Jeremiah that is reminiscent—but not a

³¹ Jeremiah 31:17.

quotation of–Zechariah 11:12-13; thus Matthew is not misattributing the fulfillment as being foretold by Zechariah:

Then that which was spoken through Jeremiah the prophet was fulfilled: “And they took the thirty pieces of silver, the price of the one whose price had been set by the sons of Israel; and they gave them for the Potter’s Field, as the Lord directed me.”

It is possible that Matthew is referring to an unwritten prophecy of Jeremiah, as he considers this in the context of *that which was spoken* (not written) by Jeremiah. It is also possible that Zechariah was repeating in summary a prophecy spoken by Jeremiah. But because we don’t have the direct referent, it is difficult to assess whether Matthew has in view prediction/happening or PFF.

Of the three non-predictive references, two bear characteristics of PFF,³² and the remaining one is difficult to categorize.³³

Conclusion

Of the seventeen πληρόω/ἀναπληρόω references in Matthew, one is not immediately discernible as either prediction/happening or PFF, four are not directly related to prophecy, five are prediction/happening, and seven are PFF. Because Matthew distinguishes between these approaches (as does Jesus), and because Matthew uses a majority of PFF in his own interpretation, it is apparent that PFF is a foundational and normative hermeneutic device to draw an intended application from a passage without having a direct prediction/happening in the context.

These instances also show that the OT passages are not changed or reinterpreted in Matthean usage, and in many cases the OT referent is complete on its own merit, without any revealed expectation of future employment. Still, the NT utilizes these passages as illustrations, prefigurings, or signs pointing to

³² Matthew 2:15, 17.

³³ Matthew 27:9-10.

a future antecedent.³⁴ Not all OT instances make a future antecedent evident, nonetheless, the later (NT) reference underscores the reality that many OT events were prefiguring things to come.

Just as John's PFF suggests a model whereby we can understand that the OT was written with single meaning in view, that the NT does not adjust or alter that meaning, and that biblical meaning is not subject to change in any context, Matthew's hermeneutic method is identical in its application of two major aspects of LGH. Consequently, John's and Matthew's hermeneutic approach to the foreshadowing of the Messiah and fulfillment of that foreshadowing in Jesus through his signs and other activities provides a significant hermeneutic precedent for biblical interlocutors of today. The parallelism in Johannine and Matthean writing between the metaphorical anticipation and the literal realization goes far beyond the simple prediction and coming to pass of events.

In Matthew 16:4 and Luke 11:29 Jesus identified Jonah as a sign pointing to himself. Notably, both writers use the same terminology (σημεῖον) employed by John. Jonah's water adventures literally happened, and they were communicated in a narrative way that demands normative, literal understanding. Yet, Jesus presented those events as a sign pointing to himself—specifically to his burial and resurrection. The events of Jonah were not in themselves metaphorical, nor were they communicated by the human author with any anticipation of metaphorical interpretation, yet Jesus (with divine author perspective) utilized those events as a metaphor that was fulfilled—or culminated—in him.

Just as a pronoun has an antecedent, foreshadowing has fulfillment. In grammatical analogy, the fulfillment is the antecedent and the foreshadowing is the pronoun. The pronoun has single meaning and only one referent, but the *usage* may not be fully understood by the reader until the antecedent is identified in the text. In short, where ISPA and LDR are wrestling with the

³⁴ Much like Paul implies that marital unity, first observed in Genesis 2, looked forward to the later antecedent in Christ and his relationship with the church (Eph 5:31-32).

potential of changing meanings, PFF argues for a set and unchanged meaning with augmented *usage*. This is the great advantage of PFF over ISPA and LDR. Change in meaning is the subject matter of hermeneutic significance. Change in usage has nothing whatsoever to do with hermeneutics, but is more a question of aesthetics. God's ultimate purpose to glorify himself and demonstrate his own character is an *aesthetic* enterprise, and his *use* of literal happenings as metaphor contributes greatly to that enterprise. John's and Matthew's PFF invites us to resolve the issue of whether there is change in meaning and consider the aesthetic function of OT passages referenced in the NT.

“Dispensation” Biblically Defined: A Consideration of the NT Usage of the Greek Term(s) οἰκονόμ(-ος/-ία)

James I. Fazio

Throughout church history, Christians have used the term “dispensation” (Gr.: οἰκονομία) to convey a range of ideas pertaining to God’s administration of the earth throughout time. This is no less true today, despite the vast proliferation of the conservative theological movement that arose within fundamentalist Christian circles over the past two centuries, known as “dispensational theology” or “dispensationalism.” Nevertheless, even among those who identify as “dispensationalists,” no singularly accepted definition has been agreed upon which both defines and delimits its theological usage. The purpose of this paper is to draw meaning directly from the biblical text, as compared against Second Temple period and early Christian literature, and to observe how the Greek terms οἰκονόμος and οἰκονομία were understood within their cultural-historical framework at the time when they were employed by Jesus and the apostles as compared against Second Temple period and early Christian literature, and how they have come to be understood in contemporary theological usage by evangelicals.

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“Dispensation” and the Problem of Definition

The problem of definition is not a recent one for those inquiring into the biblical and theological usage of the term “dispensation.” Lewis Sperry Chafer observed this in the opening words of an article published in *Bibliotheca Sacra* in 1936:

A controversy among orthodox theologians over dispensational distinctions is not new. Jonathan Edwards (1703-1758) wrote: “There is perhaps no part of divinity attended with so much intricacy, and wherein orthodox divines so much differ as the stating of the precise agreement and difference between the two dispensations of Moses and Christ” (Edwards Works I, 100). But this discussion, as is often the case, has suffered much for want of definition.³

Decades later, Charles Ryrie did not regard the risk of overstating the problem of definition when he wrote: “There is no more primary problem in the whole matter of dispensationalism than that of definition. By this is meant not simply arriving at a single sentence definition of the word but also formulating a definition/description of the concept.”⁴

In his book *The Origins of Dispensationalism: the Darby Factor*, Larry Crutchfield added to this observation when he wrote: “While there is no lack of definitions, there is lack of agreement upon those proposed.”⁵ The reason for this, he suggested, is that dispensationalism deals with complex theological concepts that are not well suited for a succinct definition, noting: “almost any brief definition is in for a certain amount of criticism.”⁶ While this is undeniable, Ryrie’s observation holds true that almost everyone who uses the term has different nuanced ideas that they would prefer to see either

³ Lewis Sperry Chafer, “Dispensationalism” in *Bibliotheca Sacra*, 93 no 372 (Oct-Dec 1936): 390.

⁴ Charles C. Ryrie, *Dispensationalism, Revised and Expanded* (Chicago: Moody, 2007), 27.

⁵ Larry V. Crutchfield, *The Origins of Dispensationalism: The Darby Factor* (Lanham, MD: University P of America, 1992), 24.

⁶ Crutchfield, *Origens*, 24.

included or excluded, so that it more closely aligns with their theological concept. Dispensationalists and non-dispensationalists are equally guilty of this. For these reasons, no singular agreed upon definition exists to describe the biblical/theological concept of a “dispensation.”

Augustine of Hippo (A.D. 354-430) was by no means among the earliest figures to use the term “dispensation” in its theological sense. However, his usage of the term in the Patristic Era did not differ substantially from those who employed it before him when he wrote:

The divine institution of sacrifice was suitable in the former dispensation, but is not suitable now. For the change suitable to the present age has been enjoined by God, who knows infinitely better than man what is fitting for every age, and who is, whether He give or add, abolish or curtail, increase or diminish, the unchangeable Governor as He is the unchangeable Creator of mutable things, ordering all events in His providence until the beauty of the completed course of time, the component parts of which are the dispensations adapted to each successive age, shall be finished, like the grand melody of some ineffably wise master of song, and those pass into the eternal immediate contemplation of God who here, though it is a time of faith, not of sight, are acceptably worshipping Him.

They are mistaken, moreover, who think that God appoints these ordinances for His own advantage or pleasure; and no wonder that, being thus mistaken, they are perplexed, as if it was from a changing mood that He ordered one thing to be offered to Him in a former age, and something else now. But this is not the case. God enjoins nothing for His own advantage, but for the benefit of those to whom the injunction is given.⁷

In so many words, the patristic writer seems to have endeavored to communicate a theological concept that would not

⁷ St. Augustine, “Letter of St. Augustine to Marcellinus (Let. CXXXVIII – A.D. 412)” in *The Works of Aurelius Augustine: Letters*, v. 2, 198.

differ radically from the more succinct definition offered by Cyrus Ingerson Scofield, who wrote nearly fifteen hundred years later: “a dispensation is a period of time during which man is tested in respect of obedience to some *specific* revelation of the will of God.”⁸ However, Scofield’s definition follows immediately with the statement: “Seven such dispensations are distinguished in Scripture,”⁹ revealing a particular nuance of his definition, differing from many who had gone before as well as come after him. However, that Scofield was by no means the first to divide scriptural history into seven distinct periods is a point beyond any dispute.¹⁰

Those who identify as Covenantal and Reformed have typically regarded as few as three or four dispensations,¹¹ along with numerous evangelicals, some of whom have chosen to be identified by the label “progressive dispensationalist.”¹² On the other end of the spectrum, there have been those who have suggested an excess of twelve dispensations, conceiving even of dispensations that exist in eternity.¹³ Although seven dispensations have been generally agreed—though not insisted—

⁸ C. I. Scofield, *Scofield Reference Bible* (New York: Oxford, 1909), 5.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ The earliest of these can be traced back to the first century, with the Epistle of Barnabas’s scheme of creation week offering a model for all of human history (Barn 15:3-5). A list of other early Christian adherents might include: Papias (AD 60 – 163), Melito of Sardis (died c. 180), Theophilus of Antioch (died 183 – 185), Tertullian (c. 155 – c. 240), Commodianus (c. AD 250), Lactantius (c. 250 – 325), Methodius (died c. 311), Hippolytus of Rome (AD 170 – 235), Victorinus of Pettau (died 303-304), and various Gnostic groups including the Montanists.

¹¹ Without enumerating the specific number, the Westminster Confession of Faith in 1646 referenced “various dispensations” (VII.VI).

¹² Blaising and Bock suggest a moderate dispensational scheme that includes “four primary dispensations in biblical history,” which include Patriarchal, Mosaic, Ecclesial, and Zionic (Craig A. Blaising and Darrell L. Bock, *Progressive Dispensationalism* [Wheaton, IL: Victor, 1993], 123).

¹³ Christopher Cone has expressed, “12 divisions most suitably represent the Biblical narrative” (Christopher Cone, “Dispensational Definition & Division Revisited” in *Dispensationalism Tomorrow and Beyond: A Theological Collection in Honor of Charles C. Ryrie*, ed. Christopher Cone (Fort Worth, TX: Tyndale Seminary P, 2008), 150.

upon, by most traditional dispensationalists, identifying those several dispensations has been a topic of much disputation. Scofield presented the most broadly accepted division in his 1909 study Bible consisting of innocence, conscience, human government, promise, law, grace, and the kingdom.¹⁴ Dallas Theological Seminary founder Lewis Sperry Chafer followed by Ryrie, Walvoord, and their Dallas Seminary colleagues followed this popular pattern during the mid-to-late twentieth century. The division of these dispensations bore subtle differences from those conceived in the nineteenth century.¹⁵

Suffice it to say, the term “dispensation” has meant different things to different people over the course of church history. While the term has carried different shades of meaning depending on the theologian, virtually all of them share the same general sense of seeking to distinguish various dealings of God with mankind throughout the progress of history. For the purposes of this article, several of these nuances will be set aside, as the chief concern before us is to ascertain how the Greek terms οἰκονομία and οἰκονόμος were understood within their cultural-historical framework at the time they were employed by Jesus and the apostles.

¹⁴ See *Scofield Reference Bible*, 5, 10, 16, 20, etc.

¹⁵ John Nelson Darby (1800-1882) and James Brooks (1830-1897) both regarded seven distinct periods, though their divisions of biblical history differed slightly from Scofield’s, as well as from each other’s. Darby regarded the dispensation beginning with Noah as the first, leaving the antediluvian age aside, effectively dismissing what others have regarded as the first two dispensations. He made up for this by conceiving of two distinct dispensations within what has commonly been regarded as the dispensation of grace—one Jewish and the other Gentile. This division has been recognized by a number of dispensationalists who identify with the label “hyper-“ or “ultra-dispensationalists” such as E. W. Bullinger, Cornelius Stam, et al. James Brooks also maintained Darby’s distinction of a “Messianic” and “Holy Ghost” dispensation within the Christian era, though by not distinguishing between the Noahic (human government) and Abrahamic (promise) eras, he still arrived at seven dispensations.

“Dispensation” According to Jesus

The Greek word translated “dispensation” in many English Bibles is *οἰκονομία*. It has also been translated in our English Bibles as “administration,” or “stewardship”—all of which convey the same basic idea of the management of an economy.¹⁶ It is in the most fundamental sense of the word that Jesus first employed this term while teaching in Judea. In Luke’s record, Jesus admonishes his disciples to be watchful and ready for his coming, saying: “Blessed are those servants whom the master, when he comes, will find watching. Assuredly I say to you that he will gird himself and have them sit down and eat, and will come and serve them Therefore you also be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect” (Luke 12:37, 40). Following this, Jesus added: “Who then is that faithful and wise steward [*οἰκονόμος*], whom his master will make ruler over his household, to give them their portion of food in due season?” (Luke 12:42), which is the first recorded usage of the term *οἰκονόμος* in the Greek NT.

Several observations can be made from the immediate context of Jesus’ usage of the word *οἰκονόμος*: First, it occurs within the context of the management of a household. This is the most fundamental sense of the word, since the etymology of the word *οἰκονόμος* reveals it to be a compound of two nouns *οἶκος* meaning “home” or “household” and *νόμος* meaning “law” or “rule.” Therefore, *οἰκονόμος* could be literally translated as “house-governor” or “house-administrator”¹⁷—although “manager” or “steward” are equally sufficient. In this parable of Jesus, the steward is appointed as overseer of a household.

The second observation from the immediate context is the steward was appointed by the master of the household. Extending

¹⁶ The English word “economy” is etymologically derived from the Latin *oeconomia*, which is transferred almost directly from this Greek term which appears in the Greek NT seven times as *οἰκονομία*.

¹⁷ Strong’s entry 3623 *οἰκονόμος* offers the term “house-distributor” as a possible alternative (James Strong, *The New Strong’s Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1990).

the theme of the term's most basic usage, the master is not only implied, he is identified in the parable as the one to whom the household belongs. This relationship of the steward to both the owner and the household further emphasizes the traditional historical-cultural usage of the word. In a sense, the steward is under the master and yet over the household. The household is not the possession of the steward; rather, the steward serves in a supervisory role as appointed by the master, and that for only a season.

This brings a third observation: the steward dispenses the master's goods. The steward does not dispense that which is his own, but rather he apportions to the household the goods which belong to the master of the house. Thus, there is a specific portion out from the greater measure of the master's possessions that are distributed to the household through the hands of the designated steward or household servant.

The fourth observation that can be made is the stewardship is temporary. The stewardship is not perpetual; it had a beginning and will have an end. Whereas stewards may come or go, the household seems to retain a direct relationship to the master that is not dependent on the relationship of the steward.

A fifth observation is: that the faithfulness of a steward must be judged. This builds upon the previous point of the temporary nature of a stewardship but adds a finer tip that emphasizes the aspect of judgment. In other words, a steward will have to give an account for his stewardship to the master, and will be judged accordingly, based on his faithfulness or lack thereof.

Finally, a sixth point that can be discerned from the immediate context is the setting for the illustration involves a transition in the master's administration. Specifically, Jesus is offering the parable to illustrate the occasion of the future return of the Son of Man, which will result in a judgment and, presumably, a turn-over in administrations at the end of the present age. For this reason, Jesus told his disciples: "Therefore you also be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect" (Luke 12:40).

Although each of the six points provided above are evident from the context of the twelfth chapter of Luke, the reader of the New Testament is not limited to this single discourse in seeking

to discern features of Jesus' usage of the term "dispensation." Luke observed Jesus' tendency to incorporate the topic of "dispensations" into his teaching on more than one occasion, with remarkable similarity between each usage. Case in point: Jesus' second occasion for the word is not unlike his first.

During his Perea ministry, Jesus addressed his disciples saying: "There was a certain rich man who had a steward [οἰκονόμος], and an accusation was brought to him that this man was wasting his goods. So he called him and said to him, 'What is this I hear about you? Give an account of your stewardship [οἰκονομία], for you can no longer be steward [οἰκονομέω]'" (Luke 16:1-2). These introductory verses set the context for Jesus' usage of "dispensation," though he continues to build upon the illustration throughout his discourse to the disciples. Jesus' usage of the term here, in Luke 16, while teaching in Perea, is in every point consistent with his previous usage of the term in Judea, as recorded in Luke 12.

Several observations are evident from the context of Luke 16: (1) it occurs within the context of the management of a household; (2) the steward was appointed by the master of the household; (3) the steward dispenses the master's goods; (4) the stewardship is temporary; (5) the faithfulness of a steward will be judged; and (6) the setting for the illustration involves a transition in the master's administration. This sixth point is no less prominent here than it was in Luke 12. It is within the context of this discourse that Jesus offers the famous statement: "He who is faithful in what is least is faithful also in much" (Luke 16:10), to which he adds: "Therefore, if you have not been faithful in the unrighteous mammon, who will commit to you the truest riches" (Luke 16:11).

With the addition of this clause, Jesus implies that there will be a dispensation following the present one, in which a truer "goods" will be dispensed to the master's household. However, this statement is not merely a continuation of the parabolic illustration, but an application which Jesus draws directly into the disciples' earthly ministry. The question of whether this application can be drawn beyond the immediate audience of Jesus' disciples is answered in Jesus' reply to Peter's previous

query: “Lord, do You speak this parable only to us, or to all people?” To this, Jesus responded: “Who then is that faithful and wise steward [οἰκονόμος], whom his master will make ruler over his household, to give them their portion of food in due season? Blessed is that servant whom his master will find so doing when he comes. Truly I say to you that he will make him ruler over all that he has” (Luke 12:42-44).

Socio-Historical Context and Early Christian Usage of “Dispensation”

Jesus’ usage of “dispensation” was in no way a departure from the normal socio-historical context of his day. The Greek terms οἰκονόμος and οἰκονομία were common to the Hellenistic world and would have been well understood by the Jewish people in first-century Judea and the surrounding regions.¹⁸ The concept, however, is not original to Hellenistic culture. It can be seen to stretch back at least as far as the Middle Kingdom of Ancient Egypt (c. 2000-1700 B.C.)¹⁹ as evidenced by the Genesis account of Joseph as the appointed steward over Potiphar’s house:

Now Joseph had been taken down to Egypt. And Potiphar, an officer of Pharaoh, captain of the guard, an Egyptian, bought him from the Ishmaelites who had taken him down there. The Lord was with Joseph, and he was a successful man; and he was in the house of his master the Egyptian. And his master saw that the Lord *was* with him and that the Lord made all he did to prosper in his hand. So Joseph found favor in his sight, and served him. Then he made

¹⁸ Kittel notes that the Greek word οἰκονόμος is “used like οἰκοδεσπότης for the ‘steward’ attested from Aesch[ylus]. Xenoph[on]. Oec[onomica (Aristotle)] οἰκονόμος can thus be the one in charge of separate branches of a household, ‘steward,’ ‘inspector of goods,’ ‘chief cook,’ etc.” (*TDNT*, ed. Gerhard Kittel and Gerhard Friedrich, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1967), 5:149).

¹⁹ If *ISBE* is to be relied upon, it reads: “At present, the total available evidence favors dating the patriarchs in the early part of the 2nd millennium B.C. –ca. 1900-1700 B.C.” (“Joseph” in *ISBE*, ed. Geoffrey W. Bromiley [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982], 2: 1130).

him overseer of his house, and all that he had he put under his authority. (Gen 29:1-4)

Though Joseph would later cross paths with Potiphar’s wife and suffer unjustly, God would no less reward his faithfulness by appointing him to be faithful over much in the house of none other than Pharaoh, himself:

Then Pharaoh said to Joseph, “Inasmuch as God has shown you all this, there is no one as discerning and wise as you. You shall be over my house, and all my people shall be ruled according to your word; only in regard to the throne will I be greater than you.” And Pharaoh said to Joseph, “See, I have set you over all the land of Egypt.” (Gen 41:39-41)

In this way, the task of the distribution of food from Pharaoh’s granaries was delegated to Joseph as the steward over all of Egypt. The biblical narrative portrays Joseph as the quintessential steward who is justly rewarded for his faithfulness over the master’s household. Kittel is therefore quite correct to observe: “Close study of both the Gk. And Heb. Is needed to fix the precise sense,”²⁰ since the illocutionary force of the term “dispensation,” throughout all of Scripture points to God as the true master, and mankind as his household. “Thus God is a householder, for the whole world is His, v. Ps. 24:1; and Moses is His steward, v. Nu. 12:7: He is trustworthy in all my house (cf. Hb. 3:1-6).”²¹

While the socio-historical context of a steward or household manager stretches as far back as Genesis and cuts across cultures and languages throughout the ancient world, the concept seems to have largely retained its meaning in the Hellenistic era as evidenced by the Second Temple literature.²² Senior Lecturer Dotan Leshem from the School of Political Science at the

²⁰ *TDNT*, 5:149.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² Kittel notes that “the word is used in the LXX, for **אֲשֶׁר עַל-הַבֵּית** in (3 *βασ.* 4:6; 16:9; 18:3; 4 *βασ.* 18:18, 37; 19:2; Is 36:3, 22; 37, 2), for **רַב** בֵּית (Est. 1:8), or **פְּחָה** (Est. 8:9)” (*TDNT*, 5:149).

University of Haifa, Israel, has written a few articles on this subject. In an article titled “What Did the Ancient Greeks Mean by οἰκονομία?” he noted that the first occurrence of the root word for οἰκονομία traces back to a poem by Phocylides in the 6th century BC.²³ Elsewhere, he had previously observed that it was the classical Greek historian-philosopher Xenophon (c. 435-354 BC) who was the first to propose a definition, identifying it as “the management and dispensation of a household.”²⁴ Xenophon identified several features which bear significance on how the term is employed in the Greek NT: (1) he regarded “the *oikos* as the totality of one’s property”²⁵—this is entirely consistent with the biblical usage; and (2) “Xenophon conceptualized οἰκονομία as the knowledge (both theoretical and practical) or prudently conducting people and things so as to generate wealth” and specifically “the generation of surplus.”²⁶

With this feature in mind, it may be seen that Jesus’ famous “Parable of the Talents” recorded in Matthew (25:14-30) as well as the corresponding “Parable of the Minas” found in Luke’s account (19:11-27), both carry strong socio-historical features that correlate directly to Jesus’ teachings on the theme of οἰκονομία. Though the term does not appear in either of those passages, the context and content of those parables make the connection unmistakable. In both parables the kingdom is likened to a rich man who gathers his servants and disperses his goods to them, with the intention that they would invest their master’s goods and yield an increase. Between the two parables different numbers of servants are called and different amounts are distributed; however, all of the servants are similarly judged based on their management of their master’s goods, upon his return. Subsequently, each one received his due recompense

²³ Dotan Leshem, “What Did the Ancient Greeks Mean by *Oikonomia*” *Journal of Economic Perspectives* 30, no. 1 (Winter 2016): 227.

²⁴ Dotan Leshem, “*Oikonomia* Redefined” in *Journal of the History of Economic Thought* 35, no. 1 (March 2013): 43.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 44.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 53.

based on the surplus he had generated—or failed to generate—for the master during the period of his absence.

Despite the absence of the term(s) οἰκονόμ(-ος/-ία) in the two parables found in Matthew 25 and Luke 19, each of the six features mentioned above are clearly present: (1) They occur within the context of the management of a household; (2) The stewards were appointed by the master of the household; (3) The stewards managed the master’s goods; (4) Their stewardship was temporary; (5) The faithfulness of each of the stewards was judged; and (6) Both parables were set against a backdrop involving a transition in economies with the present dispensation giving way to a subsequent kingdom dispensation.

That a subsequent dispensation is in mind is evidenced by the fact that the master, having received his kingdom said to the faithful steward, “Well done, good servant; because you were faithful in a very little, have authority over ten cities” (Luke 19:17). Thus, as opposed to simply being rewarded with ease and comfort, the faithful steward is rewarded with an even greater stewardship.

That the meanings of οἰκονόμ(-ος/-ία) remained relatively fixed throughout the Second Temple period is evidenced by its usage throughout the LXX, where in the days of King Solomon, Achisar and Eliac were named as “stewards” in the king’s household, among others who were appointed over the family and over the tribute (3 Bas 4:6), just as in the days when Bassa was King over the ten tribes of Israel, Oso was identified as “steward” at Thersa (3 Bas 16:9). In total, the word οἰκονόμος appears more than a half dozen times between the Books of Kings and another half dozen in Isaiah and Esther—all in agreement with the usage that has been identified above. However, the most noteworthy comparison to draw from the LXX usage of *oikonom(-os/-ia)* is found in Isaiah, with the pronouncement of the judgment of Shebna (Isa 22:15-25):

Thus saith the Lord of hosts, Go into the chamber, to Somnas the treasurer, and say to him, Why art thou here? And what hast thou to do here, that thou hast here hewn thyself a sepulcher, and madest thyself a sepulcher on high, and hast graven for thyself a dwelling

in the rock? Behold now, the Lord of hosts casts forth and will utterly destroy *such* a man, and will take away thy robe and thy glorious crown, and will cast thee into a great and unmeasured land, and there thou shalt die: and he will bring thy fair chariot to shame, and the house of thy prince to be trodden down. And thou shalt be removed from thy stewardship [τῆς οἰκονομίας], and from thy place. And it shall come to pass in that day, that I will call my servant Eliakim the son of Chelcias: and I will put on him thy robe, and I will grant him thy crown with power, and I will give thy stewardship [τὴν οἰκονομίαν] into his hands: and he shall be as a father to them that dwell in Jerusalem, and to them that dwell in Juda. And I will give him the glory of David; and he shall rule, and there shall be none to speak against him: and I will give him the key of the house of David *upon* his shoulder; and he shall open, and there shall be none to shut; and he shall shut, and there shall be none to open. And I will make him a ruler in a sure place, and he shall be for a glorious throne of his father's house. And every one that is glorious in the house of his father shall trust in him, from the least to the greatest; and they shall depend upon him in that day. Thus saith the Lord of hosts, The man that is fastened in the sure place shall be removed and be taken away, and shall fall; and the glory that is upon him shall be utterly destroyed: for the Lord has spoken it.²⁷

What is remarkable about this passage is how closely it parallels the contexts of Jesus' usage of οἰκονόμ(-ος/-ία). Somnas the treasurer has proven himself to be an unfaithful steward who has "buried" his proverbial talent in a hewn rock. Thus, his stewardship is being stripped from him and given to another.²⁸ The other parallels between this prophecy and Jesus' parables are unmistakable (Cf. Luke 16:1-12; 19:11-27; Matt 8:10-12; Matt 25:14ff). Therefore, it can be concluded that the

²⁷ Isaiah 22:15-25, LXX in *The Septuagint with Apocrypha: Greek and English*, ed. Sir Lancelot C. L. Brenton (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2011), 856.

²⁸ Compare Esther 8, where Haman's stewardship is stripped from him and given to faithful Mordecai. Within this context (Esth 8:9) we find one of the LXX usages of "steward" [τοῖς οἰκονόμοις].

usage of the terms οἰκονόμ(-ος/-ία) were maintained throughout the Second Temple period. That it continued into the early Christian era is corroborated by a host of extra-biblical sources, as evidenced by the *Tebtunis Papyri* (AD 172).²⁹ Thus, the word translated into our English Bibles as “steward,” “stewardship,” “administration,” and “dispensation,” have a generally fixed meaning that is not difficult to discern. A survey of the Second Temple literature before, and the early Christian literature afterward, both confirm that Jesus’ usage of the terms in question did not vary from the meanings that were common to the Judeo-Roman world in the first century.

“Dispensation” According to the Apostles

Up to this point there is little cause for debate, and one may be left wondering why there is any strife among biblical interpreters concerning this topic. However, a consideration of the Apostle Paul’s usage of the term(s) οἰκονόμ(-ος/-ία) may emerge as a point of contention among Christians of diverse theological orientations. This is because of the metaphorical sense in which the Apostle to the Gentiles used the term οἰκονόμος to uniquely identify himself as a steward appointed by God over the household of the church, which he termed τὴν οἰκονομίαν τῆς χάριτος τοῦ θεοῦ “the dispensation of the grace of God” (Eph 3:2). This usage occurs within the context of his epistle to the Gentile believers residing in Ephesus:

For this reason I, Paul, the prisoner of Christ Jesus for you Gentiles—if indeed you have heard of the dispensation [τὴν οἰκονομίαν] of the grace of God which was given to me for you,

²⁹ Moulton and Milligan note, “In its literal sense of ‘steward,’ ‘manager of an estate’ (as in Luke 12:42, 1 Cor 4:2) is found in P Tebt II. 402:1 (A.D. 172) Μαρτι [...] οἰκονόμῳ φλανίας Ἐπιμάχης κα[ὶ] τῶν πρότερον Ἰουλίας Καλλινίδος παρὰ Διδύμου οἰκοδόμου, ‘to Mart ..., steward of Flavia Epimache and of the property formerly belonging to Julia Kallinis, from Didymus, builder.’” (“οἰκονόμος” in *Vocabulary of the Greek Testament*, ed. J. H. Moulton and G. Milligan (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1997), 442-43.

how that by revelation He made known to me the mystery (as I have briefly written already, by which, when you read, you may understand my knowledge in the mystery of Christ), which in other ages was not made known to the sons of men, as it has now been revealed by the Spirit to His holy apostles and prophets: that the Gentiles should be fellow heirs, of the same body, and partakers of His promise in Christ through the gospel, of which I became a minister according to the gift of the grace of God given to me by the effective working of His power.

To me, who am less than the least of all the saints, this grace was given, that I should preach among the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ, and to make all see what is the fellowship [ἡ οἰκονομία] of the mystery, which from the beginning of the ages has been hidden in God who created all things through Jesus Christ; to the intent that now the manifold wisdom of God might be made known by the church to the principalities and powers in the heavenly places, according to the eternal purpose which He accomplished in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Eph 3:1-11)

In this passage the Apostle uses the familiar term “dispensation” to distinguish the context of his ministry toward the Gentiles in the current age, as contrasted against previous ages. This contrast is important because Paul is clear that the present working of God’s Spirit among the Gentiles was an altogether foreign thing and imperceptible, even to the prophets of old. This would not have been the first time Paul used this kind of language. Prior to this, he identified himself to the Gentile believers in Corinth as one compelled to serve as a steward by Divine appointment, saying, “For if I preach the gospel, I have nothing to boast of, for necessity is laid upon me; yes, woe is me if I do not preach the gospel! For if I do this willingly, I have a reward; but if against my will, I have been entrusted with a stewardship” (1 Cor 9:16-17). Knowing what is revealed by the Lukan portrayal of Saul’s/Paul’s conversion, in the Acts of the Apostles, it is not hard to conceive of what the Apostle may have had in mind when making this statement.

Across the Pauline corpus, it can be observed that Paul employed the word “dispensation” in a metaphorical or

theological sense, with a view to God’s governance over the earth.³⁰ Moreover, he repeatedly used the term(s) οἰκονόμ(-ος/-ία), with specific reference to himself serving in a unique capacity. In addition to the passage referenced above (Eph 3:1-11), Paul wrote in his epistle to the Gentile believers living in Colossae:

I became a minister, according to the stewardship from God which was given to me for you, to fulfill the word of God, the mystery which has been hidden from ages and from generations, but now has been revealed to His saints. To them God willed to make known what are the riches of the glory of this mystery among the Gentiles (Col 1:25-27).

Thus, it may be seen that the Apostle regarded himself as serving in a unique role as a divinely appointed steward over God’s household in the present dispensation. The Master’s goods which he seemed to regard himself as uniquely appointed to dispense is described here as “the grace of God.” The household seemed also to have clear demarcations in the mind of the Apostle as indicated by his usage of the term “Gentiles.” Finally, the duration of the dispensation seemed to exclude the ages past, during which time the manifold wisdom of God was previously hidden, as it has now been made manifest to the church.

If this understanding of the Apostle’s usage of “dispensation” is correct, and it is rightly perceived that he uniquely regarded himself as the steward of the mysteries of God communicated to the Gentiles in the present age, this could shed light on how he regarded his role concerning God’s judgment of his household in the transition from the present dispensation to the next when he wrote: “the day [is coming] when God will judge the secrets of men by Jesus Christ, according to my gospel” (Rom 2:16). Again,

³⁰ Kittel notes: “Paul, too, adopts οἰκονόμος and likes to use it metaphorically... . Paul also used the word οἰκονόμος as a figure for apostolic authority and knowledge in 1 C. 4:1 f. Neither here nor in Gl. 4:2 is there any concern as to the social position of the οἰκονόμος” (*TDNT*, 5:150).

he emphasized in the benediction of this same epistle to the Gentile believers in Rome:

Now to Him who is able to establish you according to my gospel and the preaching of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery kept secret since the world began but now made manifest, and by the prophetic Scriptures made known to all nations, according to the commandment of the everlasting God, for obedience to the faith—to God, alone wise, be glory through Jesus Christ forever. Amen. (Rom 16:25-27)

The similarity in language between Romans 16 and Ephesians 3 is undeniable. The content of Paul's message to the Gentiles was altogether unknown in previous ages but had now been made plain through the preaching of the gospel. Moreover, the household to whom the Apostle distributed the master's goods would one day be called upon to give an account for that which they received through him, as he indicated: "the day [is coming] when God will judge the secrets of men by Jesus Christ, according to my gospel" (Rom 2:16). Some have deduced that this is what Paul had in mind when he wrote "in the dispensation of the fullness of the times He might gather together in one all things in Christ, both which are in heaven and which are on earth—in Him" (Eph 1:10).³¹ If this be the case, then it would bring even greater parity to how Jesus and the Apostle used the term(s) οἰκονόμ(-ος/-ία), as Jesus' parables saw the faithful stewards rewarded with an even greater stewardship in the master's kingdom, upon his return (Luke 19:11-27). It is therefore likely that Paul identified two distinct dispensations in his Epistle to the Ephesian church: one over which he was appointed as a steward, and another which presumably will be administered from the throne of David, in the coming kingdom age.

³¹ While there is not unanimous agreement on which dispensation Paul had in view, dispensationalists are in consensus that the next age, otherwise known as the millennial kingdom, is the dispensation in which God will bring the fulfillment of all previous ages to pass.

Based on previous observations concerning the dispensational feature of judgment, what may be regarded as surprising about Paul’s claim in Romans 16 is that he suggested that in the coming day of judgment, it will presumably be all men³² who will be judged against Paul’s gospel. However, there is no incongruity here with the distinctive dispensational features which have been presented above, which indicated that the steward is the one who must give an account for his administration of the master’s goods. Paul clarified this point in his epistle to the Corinthians when he wrote:

Who then is Paul, and who is Apollos, but ministers through whom you believed, as the Lord gave to each one? I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the increase. So then neither he who plants is anything, nor he who waters, but God who gives the increase. Now he who plants and he who waters are one, and each one will receive his own reward according to his own labor.

For we are God’s fellow workers; you are God’s field, you are God’s building. According to the grace of God which was given to me, as a wise master builder I have laid the foundation, and another builds on it. But let each one take heed how he builds on it. For no other foundation can anyone lay than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ. Now if anyone builds on this foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw, each one’s work will become clear; for the Day will declare it, because it will be revealed by fire; and the fire will test each one’s work, of what sort it is. (1 Cor 3:5-13)

Besides Paul, the only other apostle who used the term “dispensation” was Peter. It can be seen from Peter’s usage of the term that he applied it not to himself, but to all believers, thereby expressing a similar sense as seen above. That is to say, Peter used the word οἰκονόμος with respect to the general stewardship that is common to all Christian believers when he

³² Based on parallel passages found in the Pauline corpus (cf. Rom 14:10-12; 1 Cor 3:9-15; 2 Cor 5:10; etc.) one could well argue that Paul has in mind the household of faith and not the whole world.

wrote, "As every man hath received the gift, even so minister the same one to another, as good stewards of the manifold grace of God" (1 Pet 4:10). It is evident from the context that Peter was not regarding believers as "stewards" in quite the same capacity as Paul, who had used the word with reference to himself in his apostolic capacity (Eph 3:1-11; Col 1:25-27; etc.). In the very next verse, Peter went on to write, "If any man speak, let him speak as the oracles of God; if any man minister, let him do it as of the ability which God giveth: that God in all things may be glorified through Jesus Christ, to whom be praise and dominion for ever and ever. Amen" (1 Pet 4:11). Thus, Peter was no more likening every Christian's stewardship to that of Paul's than he was equating every Christian's words to the apostle's. Nevertheless, the writings of the apostles agree with the Lukan portrayal of Jesus' teachings, that every believer will undergo judgment upon the Master's return at the end of the present age.

Based on the apostles' usage of the term "dispensation," three distinct administrations may be seen to emerge from the pages of Scripture: the first being the household of Israel, over which Moses was appointed as a steward, referenced in the Epistle to the Hebrews (Heb 3:1-6); the second being the household of the church, over which Paul was uniquely appointed, referenced in the Epistle to the Ephesians (Eph 3:1-9); and the third being the household of Israel and the nations, over which the seat of David will preside, also referenced in the Epistle to the Ephesians (Eph 1:10; cf. Ezek 37:23-25). This understanding does not reflect any great variance from how Augustine used the term in the fifth century when he wrote, "The divine institution of sacrifice was suitable in the former dispensation, but is not suitable now."³³ This expression seems to take into account the rules which governed God's household under a previous administration and sets them at variance from those which are now suitable under the present economy.

³³ St. Augustine, "Letter of St. Augustine to Marcellinus," 198.

Observations from Early and Modern Usage of “Dispensation”

One question which almost universally arises from discussing “dispensations” is the impact of the nineteenth century Anglo-Irish churchman, John Nelson Darby (1800-1882), who has been popularly regarded as the founder of the theological system known as “dispensationalism.” It is therefore relevant to consider his usage of the term and how it has subsequently come to be used in modern theological vernacular. A frequent charge that opponents have leveled against dispensationalism is that it is a recent development which emerged in the early nineteenth century with John Nelson Darby.³⁴ While this point has been rightly refuted,³⁵ it is not entirely without warrant. While by no means was he the first to develop a dispensational understanding of biblical history, Darby served a unique role in the history of dispensational thought.

Darby was a brilliant, if not a bit eccentric, theologian whose educational pedigree matched his upbringing as a member of the gentry class in England, and afterward Ireland, where he emerged at the top of his class at Trinity College Dublin.³⁶ His program of study consisted of translating from the classical languages entire passages of Latin and Greek into English. A history of Trinity College Dublin notes that “St. Luke’s Gospel” in addition to the “first four books of Xenophon’s *Cryopedia*” were numbered among the recommended source materials for the university

³⁴ William E. Cox, *An Examination of Dispensationalism* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1963), 3. Keith A. Mathison, *Dispensationalism: Rightly Dividing the People of God?* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1995), 11.

³⁵ See William C. Watson, *Dispensationalism Before Darby: Seventeenth Century and Eighteenth Century English Apocalypticism* (Silverton, OR: Lampion P, 2015).

³⁶ James I. Fazio, “John Nelson Darby: The Unknown and Well Known Nineteenth Century Irish Reformer” in *Forged from Reformation: How Dispensational Thought Advances the Reformed Legacy* (San Diego, CA: SCS P, 2017), 84.

examinations.³⁷ Elsewhere it is reported that Trinity College examinations included “the Gospels and the Acts in Greek.”³⁸ Darby’s mastery of the classical languages was evidenced by his quarterly test scores, culminating in his being awarded the Gold Medal in Classics upon completing his bachelor’s degree in 1819, for exemplary performance throughout all of his examinations.³⁹ Later in life, Darby’s mastery of the Greek language was demonstrated by his translation of the Greek Testament into multiple languages, including English, German, and French.

Providence would have it that at the very same time Darby was studying and translating Greek texts as an emerging classical scholar “the study of the ancient economy made its debut at the beginning of the nineteenth century with the publication of *The Public Economy of Athens* by August Böckh.”⁴⁰ The course of Darby’s life would coincide very neatly with a burgeoning study of the Greek οἰκονομία as Leshem notes, “It was only towards the end of the century, however, following the publication of *The Rise of National Economy* by Karl Bücher, that it entered the mainstream of classical scholarship.”⁴¹ It comes as no surprise, then, that Darby’s understanding of the biblical usage of the Greek term(s) οἰκονόμ(-ος/-ία), reflected the socio-historical context far more than the way it had come into popular usage by clergyman in the centuries which preceded him. Without a doubt, Darby put a more fine-tipped point on the way he employed the term “dispensation,” which reflected a departure from how it was commonly used in his day. He stated this objection when he wrote from Geneva in 1841: “I do not hold to the word dispensation, although it is generally used to specify a certain state of things, established by the authority of God, during a

³⁷ W. Macneile Dixon, *Trinity College, Dublin* (London: F. E. Robinson, 1902), 154.

³⁸ R. B. McDowell and D. A. Webb, *Trinity College Dublin 1592-1952: An Academic History* (Ireland: Trinity College Dublin P, 2004), 118.

³⁹ Trinity College Dublin records (1810-1819) have been personally consulted by the author, in making this determination.

⁴⁰ Leshem, “*Oikonomia* Redefined,” 44.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

given period.”⁴² This was, in fact, how the term had come to be commonly regarded, as evidenced by writings a century before Darby, as seen in the writings of the Viscount John Shute Barrington who, in 1728, offered a detailed arrangement that would look very familiar to anyone who has carried a *Scofield Reference Bible*.⁴³

Darby made it a point to distinguish biblical “dispensations” based on God’s administrative delegations, and was reluctant to identify a period of human history as a dispensation where he did not deem the biblical text gave sufficient warrant to do so.⁴⁴ Darby’s reckoning of dispensations centered on God’s administrative responsibilities, and included such critical features as testing, failure, and subsequent judgment.⁴⁵ These very elements are also observable in Jesus’ usage of the term “dispensation” where the steward was called by the master to give an account for his stewardship (Luke 12:27-42; 16:1-2). Nevertheless, Darby took special care to refute the claim that

⁴² J. N. Darby, “Some Further Developments on the Principles Set Forth in the Pamphlet, Entitled ‘On the Formation of Churches’ and Reply to Some Objections Made to those Principles” in *The Collected Writings of J. N. Darby: Ecclesiastical No. 1: Volume 1*, ed. William Kelly (Stow Hill Bible and Tract Depot, n.d.), 169.

⁴³ Barrington perceived biblical history according to dispensations which he identified from creation to the Fall, the fall to Noah, Noah to Abraham, etc. A distinctive point of his scheme is that he uniquely regarded the biblical terms “generations” and “sons” as textual indicators, which pattern succeeding dispensationalists—such as Darby who began writing 100 years afterward—did not tend to follow (John Shute Barrington, *An Essay on the Several Dispensations of God to Mankind, in the Order, in which they lie in the Bible* [London, 1728]).

⁴⁴ Darby expressed this idea in the following way: “I am not aware that the first or Adamic state is ever called a dispensation, or οἰκονομία, or anything like it.” Nevertheless, he acknowledged that it may be referred to as such: “We refer to the period during which Adam was clothed with authority, as head over all things in this lower world. That period formed the dispensation, as it may be called, of the beginning of time; and was, through illapse of sin, precipitated to a close” (J. N. Darby, “The Dispensation of the Fulness of Times” in *The Collected Writings of J. N. Darby: Critical No. 1: Volume 13*, ed. William Kelly [Stow Hill Bible and Tract Depot, n.d.], 153).

⁴⁵ Darby, “Some Further Developments,” 173-74.

salvation in any dispensation was by any other means than by the shedding of Christ's blood, saying: "salvation through the blood of Christ existed before this dispensation, and, in like manner, as there will be faithful ones under the Antichrist, it is evident that access to the throne of grace will yet be open."⁴⁶

Scofield maintained a similar framework to Darby's, insomuch as it included critical dispensational elements such as testing, failure, and judgment.⁴⁷ However, Scofield's scheme reflected the early dispensations beginning with Adam and Eve in the Garden that Barrington had previously regarded. Scofield's regard for these early dispensations may have been influenced by the traditional Reformed view concerning the covenants which included an Adamic and Edenic covenant, both of which are referenced in the Westminster Confession of Faith by the name "covenant of works" and "covenant of grace."⁴⁸ Scofield termed these two initial dispensations "innocency" and "conscience," and perceived each of them as ending in failure and subsequent judgment. The former gave way to the latter, while the latter issued in the judgment that befell the earth in the days of Noah, ushering in the dispensation of "human government."⁴⁹ While these reflect a subtle departure from Darby's usage, they are not at odds with the way the term was employed by Christ and the apostles, and is entirely consistent with the framework of dispensationalists before him.⁵⁰

Following Scofield, Lewis Sperry Chafer advanced dispensational theology in the first half of the twentieth century. However, it may be said that Lewis Sperry Chafer painted with

⁴⁶ Ibid., 172.

⁴⁷ Scofield wrote, "Each of the Dispensations may be regarded as a new test of the natural man, and each ends in judgment—marking his utter failure" (Cyrus I. Scofield, *Rightly Dividing the Word of Truth* [2 Tim 2:15]; *Ten Outline Studies of the More Important Divisions of Scripture* [Philadelphia: Philadelphia School of the Bible, 1921], 20).

⁴⁸ The Westminster Confession of Faith VII, II-III offers Genesis 2:17 as the verse where this first covenant is revealed, and Genesis 3:15 as the place-marker for the second; however, strict Biblicists may take exception to the lack of exegetical support for these covenants.

⁴⁹ Scofield, *Rightly Dividing the Word of Truth*, 21.

⁵⁰ Cf. Barrington, *Essay on the Several Dispensations of God*, 8-18.

too broad a brush when he offered the following criteria concerning to whom the term “dispensationalist” might properly apply:

(1) Any person is a dispensationalist who trusts the blood of Christ rather than bringing an animal sacrifice. (2) Any person is a dispensationalist who disclaims any right or title to the land which God covenanted to Israel for an everlasting inheritance. And (3), any person is a dispensationalist who observes the first day of the week rather than the seventh. To all this it will be replied that every Christian does these things, which is obviously true; and it is equally true that, to a very considerable degree, all Christians are dispensationalists. However, not all Christians, though sincere, are as well instructed in the spiritual content of the Scriptures as others, nor have they seen the necessity of recognizing other and deeper distinctions which do confront the careful student of the Word of God.⁵¹

Despite that Chafer afterward tempered this statement when he asserted that all Christians are “*partial* dispensationalists,” he risked overstating his case and watering down those quintessential distinctions that uniquely define one who recognizes the various dispensations as they are presented in the biblical text. However, history may prove that even greater harm was done by Charles Caldwell Ryrie, who during the second half of the twentieth century reduced those quintessential elements which distinguish a dispensationalist to three features, which he termed the *sine qua non* of dispensationalism. These three essential elements, defined by Ryrie are (1) perceiving a distinction between Israel and the church; (2) consistently applying a literal grammatical-historical interpretive method to the biblical text, and (3) perceiving God’s doxological purpose throughout all of history.⁵²

If Ryrie had intended that these three features could serve to delineate a “*partial* dispensationalist,” then the claim may have been warranted. But, to distill the biblical, historical, and

⁵¹ Chafer, “Dispensationalism,” 391.

⁵² Ryrie, *Dispensationalism*, 45-48.

theological distinctives of dispensational thought down to these three principles is far too reductionistic. If Ryrie is warranted in presenting these three principles as the litmus test for “what marks off a person as a dispensationalist,”⁵³ then, a broad swath of the evangelical community, including many Covenantal-Reformed theologians who abhor the term “dispensationalist,” would properly be counted among them. Ryrie’s loose definition may well be responsible for opening the door to the subsequent generation of self-identified “progressive dispensationalists” arising from the ranks of Dallas Theological Seminary, within the next quarter-century.⁵⁴

Today, the term(s) οἰκονόμ(-ος/-ία), is employed by churchmen in a way that is not very different from the theologians who preceded Darby. “Dispensation” has been popularly used to describe any age, or period of time that is distinguishable from another. Subsequently, the less theologically discerning biblical readers become, the more tentatively they may hold to the several dispensational distinctions presented throughout Scripture. This is evidenced by the tendency of progressive dispensationalists to reduce the dispensations of Scripture to four. Alternatively, those who have made it a point to make biblical distinctions, without regard for those quintessential elements which constitute a dispensation, may apply the term to multiplied periods extending through eternity. Both of these should be avoided and a more socio-historically, biblically, and theologically precise usage should emerge in its place. It is the recommendation of this author that the preferred usage would be one which duly considers the six criteria presented above: First, with a view to the management of God’s household. Second, taking into account God’s appointed

⁵³ Ibid., 45.

⁵⁴ Darrell Bock, Craig Blaising, and Robert Saucy were among the early proponents of progressive dispensationalism in the 1980s-1990s. All three men were graduates of Dallas Theological Seminary, the seminary founded by Lewis Sperry Chafer, and where Charles Ryrie served as professor of systematic theology and dean of doctoral studies. Bock and Blaising were counted among DTS faculty, while Saucy had gone on to accept a faculty position at Talbot Seminary.

steward(s) pertaining to that dispensation. Third, with full consideration of the master’s goods which are being dispensed in that administration. Fourth, accounting for the fact that the stewardship is temporary and will give way to another—up to the kingdom age. Fifth, a recognition that the faithfulness of each steward will be judged by God. And sixth, an acknowledgment that the thrust of Jesus and the apostles’ message, throughout the New Testament, directs the reader to a future transition of economies, culminating in the Messianic kingdom.

Subsequent to these considerations, and with a view to the acknowledged problem of definition that dispensationalism has suffered up until now, it is incumbent on those who recognize these historical features, as well as the language of Scripture, to seek a solution for this persistent issue. Therefore, the following is humbly proposed in attempt to move toward resolving this long-standing problem. *A dispensation is an administration of a household, whereby a steward is appointed to manage his master’s goods in order to yield a surplus, for which he will ultimately be judged according to his faithfulness as a steward.*

Conclusion

This article has called attention to the fact that over the course of church history, Christians have used the term “dispensation” (Gr.: οἰκονομία) in a variety of ways, and to varying degrees of agreement with the biblical record. It is incumbent upon those who identify as “dispensational theologians” to offer a definition that both defines and delimits its theological usage. Moreover, it is necessary that that definition be consistent with the biblical text, giving due credence to the cultural-historical framework at the time when they were employed by Jesus and the apostles, and must therefore be equally applicable to the socio-historical as well as theologically-metaphorical senses in which it occurs. In consideration of these elements, the following definition has been proposed: *a dispensation is an administration of a household, whereby a steward is appointed to manage his master’s goods in order to yield a surplus, for which he will ultimately be judged according to his faithfulness as a steward.*

The Postponement of the New Exodus Theory in Non-Dispensational Hermeneutics

Neal Cushman

One of traditional dispensationalism's much maligned teachings is that the kingdom was "postponed" due to the Jewish rejection of the King's offer, as recorded in the Gospels.² Some non-dispensational theologians infer from this that dispensationalists believe that since Israel's national restoration was postponed for a future time, God turned his attention away from the Jews and created the church. Plan "A" did not work out, so plan "B" was initiated.³

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² This essay compares and contrasts the traditional dispensational view of the offer, rejection, and postponement of the kingdom with some of the views of non-dispensational theories of the kingdom. For ease of conversation, I do not always qualify "dispensationalism" with the term "traditional" to distinguish it from progressive dispensationalism since the comparison and contrast that I wish to accomplish is between dispensational and nondispensational views of postponement.

³ In his analysis of dispensationalism, Timothy Weber goes so far as to accuse dispensationalists of believing that God was "forced" to postpone the kingdom as a result of Israel's rejection of her Messiah ("Dispensationalism," in *New and Enlarged Handbook of Christian Theology*, ed. Donald W. Musser and Joseph L. Price, rev. ed. [Nashville: Abingdon, 2003], 130). Philip Mauro omits the dispensational belief that Israel needed to repent as a nation prior to any inauguration of the kingdom: "Did your Lord, during His earthly ministry ever present or announce Himself as an earthly king? Did He ever offer to the oppressed people of Judea, either in person or through the lips of His disciples, the earthly kingdom they had been taught to expect? Had he ever, by word or act, sought to incite insurrection against the rule of Caesar, or given any countenance whatever to the political ambitions of the Jews? Manifestly, had the Lord uttered a single word that could have been construed as a proclamation or

They further observe the dispensationalist view that the church was unknown to the prophets of the OT, so on this basis plan “B” is not even mentioned in the OT. Therefore, they assume that dispensationalists believe that God initiated some type of spiritual kingdom at this juncture of human history since Israel rejected his original plan.⁴

Likewise, since many dispensationalists call the church age a “parenthesis” in God’s timetable, it appears to non-dispensationalists that dispensational theology seriously downgrades the church and all that comes with it. From a grammatical standpoint, a parenthesis in a sentence typically denotes a word, phrase, clause, or sentence that is less important than the rest of the text. Essentially the sentence retains its meaning in the absence of the parenthesis. In the order of English grammatical significance, this punctuation communicates ideas that are less important than ideas connected to the independent clause by colons, semi-colons, and even dashes. So why would dispensationalists bracket the church age as a parenthesis in God’s program?

Therefore, non-dispensationalists accuse dispensationalists of reducing the church’s existence and its task of fulfilling the Great Commission for the past few millennia to a placeholder in time until God resumes his original plan, which is to inaugurate the mediatorial kingdom. However, although traditional dispensationalists use the terms, “postponement,” “mystery,” and “parenthesis” in their descriptions of how the mediatorial

suggestion that he was about to claim the throne, or would accept it, there would have been thousands of witnesses to prove the accusation. But there was no proof forthcoming” (Philip Mauro [*God’s Present Kingdom*] as cited in Bruce K. Waltke, “Kingdom Promises as Spiritual,” in *Continuity and Discontinuity: Perspectives on the Relationship Between the Old and New Testaments: Essays in Honor of S. Lewis Johnson, Jr.* [Westchester, IL: Crossway, 1988], 271).

⁴ Bruce Waltke claims that Scofield and Chafer are the originators of the postponement theory of the kingdom. Waltke summarizes both dispensationalists: “when Israel rejected Christ, he withdrew the earthly kingdom, postponing its coming until after his second advent and in the interim intercalated a spiritual kingdom, the church, which was unforeseen by the prophets” (“Kingdom Promises,” 271).

kingdom relates to the church, they do not view the church age as plan “B” nor do they minimize its significance in the overarching purpose of God.

It is not my intent in this article to (1) address the postponement theory broadly from the standpoint of teaching in the Gospels and Acts; (2) discuss supposed theological inconsistencies with reference to a dispensational framework of postponement;⁵ and (3) argue for a new point to add to Ryrie’s *sine qua non*. My more modest goal is to suggest that since both dispensationalists and non-dispensationalists embrace particular postponement theories, the idea should not be considered odd.

Offer, Rejection, and Postponement

Traditional dispensationalists emphasize three related ideas in the Gospels and Acts that are related to these terms: (1) the genuine offer of the mediatorial kingdom to Israel; (2) Israel’s rejection of her Messiah; and (3) the eventual retraction of the offer of the kingdom to Israel and postponement to a later time. Although they may disagree on how each of these themes are developed in the Gospels and Acts, especially as related to timing, they agree that there must be an offer, a rejection, and a postponement of the kingdom to the Jewish people.

⁵ For example, non-dispensationalists argue that (1) postponement reflects poorly on God’s ability to accomplish his purposes; (2) if the offer of the kingdom was accepted during the three-year ministry of Jesus, how would his sacrificial death be accomplished? (3) if Peter offers the kingdom in Acts 3, then what would happen to the creation of the church (Acts 2) and Jesus’ promise to build it (Matt 16)? Covenant theologian Oswald T. Allis objects strenuously that Peter’s sermon in Acts 3 could not possibly be an offer of a geopolitical Jewish kingdom, for the church age had already begun as recorded in Acts 2. He insists that it is preposterous that the kingdom would be offered to the same Jews who had blood on their hands from killing the Messiah (*Prophecy and the Church: An Examination of the Claim of Dispensationalists that the Christian Church is a Mystery Parenthesis which Interrupts the Fulfillment to Israel of the Kingdom Prophecies of the Old Testament* [Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2001], 140). One might retort, how is it possible that God would offer salvation to these same Jews in this context? What is the difference in terms of God’s gracious offer of forgiveness?

Contingency and the Kingdom

Stanley Toussaint makes a case for contingency in the promise of the kingdom to Israel by examining contingencies in Scripture that fulfill the pattern of a divine promise to man coupled with conditions for its fulfillment. If these promises were unconditional, then they would have to be fulfilled at some time in the future, albeit not necessarily through the individuals who violated the conditions.⁶ Toussaint posits that if these examples are frequent enough in scripture, then the case for interpreting the Gospel writers' offer of the kingdom to Israel as a genuine offer that was rejected and thereby postponed would be strengthened.⁷

An example that Toussaint alludes to but does not develop is particularly relevant to this question. Following Israel's journey from Mount Sinai where God established the Mosaic Covenant with his people Israel, Israel found itself positioned to enter the land that had been promised to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. The terms of the Abrahamic covenant had been reiterated to Moses while still in Egypt so that Moses understood that Yahweh would surely deliver the Hebrew people from the Egyptians, bring them to the land, and conquer the nations who resided there so that Israel would inherit this land forever.⁸

⁶ Stanley D. Toussaint, "The Contingency of the Coming of the Kingdom," in *Integrity of Heart, Skillfulness of Hands: Biblical and Leadership Studies in Honor of Donald K. Campbell*, ed. Charles C. Dyer and Roy B. Zuck (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994), 225-27. Toussaint lists (1) the repentant or unrepentant response of nations (Jer 18:7-10); (2) of Jereboam (1 Kings 11:38); (3) of Israel as God's treasured people (Exod 19:5-6); and generally of the spiritual response of Israel as a people (Deut 28).

⁷ Toussaint briefly cites Deuteronomy 28:1-68 and Joshua 23:11-16 (*ibid.*, 226).

⁸ (1) God remembers his covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (Exod 2:24-25); (2) he affirms the covenant by promising to deliver his people from Egypt (Exod 3:6-8), bringing them to Canaan (Exod 3:8-9); (3) he assures his people of victory over the inhabitants of the land (Exod 23:20-33; 33:2; 34:11; Deut 7:1; 20:17); and (4) the land is promised as Israel's possession forever (Exod 32:13; Lev 25:34).

However, since Israel failed to believe that Yahweh would deliver the nations into their hands, he postponed their entry into the promised land for 40 years while causing the entire male adult population (with the exception of Joshua and Caleb) to die off in the wilderness (Num 14:28-39). Thus, Israel inherited the promised land after a 40-year postponement. The original offer of the land was genuine; if Israel had believed the Lord and had rejected the evil report of the ten spies, they surely would have entered the land immediately. Disobedience and unbelief brought about the tragic loss of the blessing of the exodus generation inheriting the land, thereby becoming the paradigm by which unbelief would be measured in generations to come.⁹

One might ask, if Israel had believed the Lord and had entered the promised land at that point, how would Moses have died? Would he have led Israel across the Jordan and into Canaan? For since Israel rejected God's offer of the land, its inheritance was postponed, and Moses was forced to face a situation in which he failed to treat Yahweh as holy (Num 20:13).

And the Lord said to Moses and Aaron, "Because you did not believe in me, to uphold me as holy in the eyes of the people of Israel, therefore you shall not bring this assembly into the land that I have given them."¹⁰

As a result, he died on Mount Nebo and was allowed only to view the land from this mountain; in his place Joshua led the people into the land. However, if the people had accepted God's promise of the land, then the time and place of Moses' death would be altered, and Joshua's role in leading Israel in the conquest of Canaan would be uncertain. Of course, speculation on matters like this one seems pointless.

Likewise, traditional dispensationalists believe that it is pointless to raise questions about the death of Messiah had

⁹ See Psalm 95:7-11; Hebrews 3:7-4:16.

¹⁰ Unless otherwise indicated, scripture references in this article are taken from the English Standard Version, 2011.

national Israel repented and accepted Jesus at his first advent.¹¹ The sacrificial death of Christ was essential to every aspect of God's redemptive program: the salvation of the Gentiles, the founding of the church, the restoration of Israel, and the removal of sin's curse on creation. Numerous predictions in the law, the prophets, the writings, and in the words of Jesus tell us that the Messiah would suffer, die, and rise again.

Furthermore, the rejection of the Messiah by the Jews is also predicted, and so it happened as God had planned: John the Baptist and Jesus offered the kingdom based on national repentance; the Jewish nation rejected the offer; Jesus was crucified; and the offer of the kingdom was suspended and postponed. However, from the perspective of a sovereign God, no postponement occurred.

Traditional Dispensationalists' Language about Postponement

Traditional dispensationalists' language related to kingdom postponement clarifies Jesus' offer of the kingdom at the beginning of his ministry. Mark writes, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel" (Mark 1:15). In this announcement Jesus does not offer individual salvation or even a spiritual kingdom; he does not announce the beginning of the church. The offer that Jesus presents is the inauguration of the Jewish earthly kingdom with the Messiah as its king.

Although Darby does not use the term "postponement" or "delay" to describe this phenomenon, he suggests that an offer of the kingdom was made and then rejected by the Jews; as a result,

¹¹ See Toussaint's answers to Enrich Sauer (*From Eternity to Eternity: An Outline of Divine Purposes* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1954], 175-76), in "Contingency," 235-37). Walter Kaiser Jr. argues that the necessity of the death of Christ during Jesus' first advent is the "most serious objection" to the idea of a genuine offer of the kingdom to Israel. Moreover, Kaiser concludes based on his reading of the Gospels that he sees "no evidence for such an offer" ("Kingdom Promises as Spiritual and National," in *Continuity and Discontinuity: Perspectives on the Relationship Between the Old and New Testaments: Essays in Honor of S. Lewis Johnson, Jr.*, ed. John S. Feinberg [Westchester, IL: Crossway, 1988], 298).

humanity exists in “a period during which the world is not ordered according to the righteous judicial power of the Son of man’s kingdom.”¹² Darby continues by stating that the church operates in “the interval between the rejection of the Son of man upon earth and his reigning upon the earth.”¹³ Thus, although Darby does not use the term “postpone” in this discussion, he infers it by affirming the offer, the rejection of the kingdom by the Jews, and the resulting “interval” in which the church is the focal point of God’s work. Following this interval, the Son of Man takes up his role as the king who governs the world from Jerusalem.

It is likely that Lewis Sperry Chafer was the first to present an extended defense of the offer, rejection, and postponement of the kingdom.¹⁴ Chafer emphasizes the veracity of Yahweh’s promises in the OT, and how although the kingdom that was promised to the Jews was postponed, God’s plan will not be defeated. Moreover, Chafer insists that God’s plan has not changed:

These new conditions flowing from, and made possible by, the cross are not a readjustment of defeated OT purposes, or the merging of the old order into the new. What was purposed in the earthly kingdom is still following its own divine order and development to its own mighty consummation. Its present form is exactly what God intended it to be at this hour, and all this will lead as certainly to the fulfillment of every predicted manifestation in the earth.¹⁵

Therefore, Chafer is cautious in his use of the term “postponement” in respect to the Davidic kingdom, not wanting to give the impression that God was forced to change his plan

¹² William Kelly, ed. *Collected Writings by John Nelson Darby*, vol 2 (Oak Park, IL: Bible Truth Publications, reprinted, 1971), no pagination. accessed September 2, 2018, www.plymouthbrethren.org/article/11501.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ I cannot confirm it, but it is possible that he is the first to use the term “postpone” in relation to the promised Jewish kingdom (Lewis Sperry Chafer, *The Kingdom History and Prophecy* [Philadelphia: Sunday School Times, 1915], 23).

¹⁵ Ibid., 24.

because of the rejection of the Jews. Rather, God's plan was just as he had intended.

Charles Ryrie's discussion on the offer of the kingdom includes "postponement," although he is hesitant to embrace this term and goes so far as to say that it is "inadequate" because it only describes the kingdom from Israel's perspective, and not from God's perspective. However, he states, "Though one could wish for a more inclusive word, there does not seem to be sufficient reason for rejecting it completely."¹⁶ For Ryrie, the term is suitable because it distinguishes the Davidic kingdom from other forms of God's kingdom rule. A dispensationalist can believe that the rule of Messiah on earth has been postponed while believing that the universal kingdom is present and active.¹⁷

J. Randall Price, who writes a compelling essay on the postponement of the Davidic kingdom from Daniel 9, is not averse to using postponement language as long as one regards "such a delay [as] only temporary, and *prophetic*, because we understand a purposeful, preordained act in the divine program."¹⁸ Price also dispels the notion that the term "parenthetical" as applied to the church places this institution in an inferior place as compared to Israel. On the contrary, "parenthesis" is used only to indicate a chronology of God's plan, and not a position.¹⁹

We may summarize that when traditional dispensationalists speak of the postponement of the kingdom, they do so from a human perspective. God's plan is not overturned by man's failure to respond to God's offer of the kingdom. Since we would not avoid the term "postpone" in reference to describing other biblical events where human contingency is involved, neither

¹⁶ *Dispensationalism*. rev. and expanded ed. (Chicago: Moody, 1995), 159n13.

¹⁷ Ryrie, *Dispensationalism*, 156.

¹⁸ I am grateful for the suggestion of Mike Stallard that I examine Price's essay in respect to my thesis ("Prophetic Postponement in Daniel 9 and Other Texts," in *Issues in Dispensationalism*, ed. Wesley R. Willis and John R. Master [Chicago: Moody, 1994], 136).

¹⁹ Price, *Prophetic Postponement*, 138.

should be avoid using the term for the postponement of the kingdom concept.

Non-Dispensational Postponement Theories

The New Exodus theologies that have grown in popularity in recent years essentially affirm eschatological frameworks in which national Israel has no future. On a broad level of analysis, they assert that the Gospels were written to show that just as Moses led the people of God out of the bondage of Egypt, Jesus leads a new people of God out of the bondage of sin in order to live under the perfect reign of their king. The church, therefore, receives the transformed promises of the covenant that had once been restricted to the nation of Israel.

As part of the framework for this reading of the Old and New Testaments, some New Exodus studies suggest that particular elements of the return of the Jewish captives from Babylon were disappointing or incomplete. In other words, the response did not rise to the condition established by Yahweh for Israel's complete and glorious restoration. As a result, the fulfillment was postponed or fulfilled partially.

Gentry and Wellum, Kingdom Through Covenant

Gentry and Wellum suggest that the release and return of the exiles from Babylon occurs in two stages. The first is initiated by Yahweh's servant, Cyrus, while the second is initiated by Yahweh's perfect servant, Jesus Christ. The first deliverance is essentially physical, while the second is spiritual. Taken together, the exile ends.²⁰ In their approach to the seventy weeks of Daniel 9, they state,

Before the new exodus, there will be a longer period of exile. Thus the real return from exile, a return including the forgiveness of sins, renewal of the covenant, and consecration of the temple, will not take just seventy years, but rather seventy 'sevens,' i.e., a much longer time. This *fundamental point* of the vision has unfortunately

²⁰ Peter J. Gentry and Stephen J. Wellum, *Kingdom Through Covenant: A Biblical Theological Understanding of the Covenants* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), 538-40.

escaped the attention of proponents of both dispensational and nondispensational treatments in the last hundred years.²¹

Gentry and Wellum's framework for understanding Daniel's vision of seventy weeks is essentially to divide the time prophesied into two segments: the first, 70 years, extends until the commission of Artaxerxes to Ezra, who decreed that he could return to Jerusalem and restore temple worship. The remainder of the prophesied weeks, the sixty-two week segment, and the one-week segment, are grouped together and considered as one unit, accomplishing the spiritual objectives of the prophecy. The authors argue that the sixty-two week period is segmented as such because nothing significant happens during this time. Messiah is cut off in the seventieth week. It would be interesting to discuss here the identity of the "anointed" one(s) in Daniel 9:25-26, or how both the crucifixion of Jesus and the fall of Jerusalem could occur in the seventieth week, but space does not allow.

However, it is germane to this discussion to note that Gentry and Wellum divide the restoration of Israel into two segments, an "already/not yet" framework. The physical restoration of Israel occurs during the era of the return from Babylon, but the spiritual restoration of "Israel" occurs during the ministry of Christ as recorded in the Gospels. Given other "already/not yet" schemes in biblical studies that place the spiritual fulfillment of the prophecy first with the physical fulfillment coming later, it is interesting that Gentry and Wellum reverse this framework.²² By placing the physical aspects of fulfillment first, they downplay the importance of the return from Babylon, claiming that "the real return from exile" is the spiritual one that occurs at the first advent of Christ.²³

²¹ Ibid., 541.

²² See Craig A. Blaising and Darrell L. Bock, *Progressive Dispensationalism* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1993), 97-98. G. E. Ladd is credited as the one who originated the idea of an "already/not yet" framework for viewing the fulfillment of prophecy (*The Presence of the Future: The Eschatology of Biblical Realism*, rev. ed. [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974]).

²³ Gentry and Wellum, *Kingdom Through Covenant*, 541.

The net effect of Gentry and Wellum's two-stage fulfillment of the prophecy regarding Israel's return from exile is delay. What happens under Zerubbabel, Nehemiah, and Ezra is inconsequential compared to the supposed "second exodus" that occurs in the Gospels. According to Gentry and Wellum, the true release from Babylonian exile does not take place for more than four hundred years after the original prophecy begins to be fulfilled. Although they do not use "delay" or "postponement" language to describe this process, it stands to reason that this theory requires an interval between its initial and its complete fulfillment. From a divine perspective, Gentry and Wellum would argue that no delay occurs; from a human perspective, the fulfillment of the prophecy is delayed or postponed. Although this analysis of Gentry and Wellum's thesis may not seem fair-minded to them, my critique is similar to the accusation that nondispensationalists bring against the traditional dispensational theory of the postponement of the kingdom.

G. K. Beale, A New Testament Biblical Theology

G. K. Beale asserts that the kingdom that was prophesied in the OT was "beginning to be fulfilled" at the start of Jesus's ministry (Mark 1:14-15). He opines that although Israel had been physically freed from its captivity in Babylon, it was still in spiritual bondage, only to be released during the first advent of Jesus Christ, a "new exodus" in the history of the people of God. According to Beale, it is at this point in time that the kingdom is "transformed."²⁴

Perhaps one of the most striking features of Jesus' kingdom is that it appears not to be the kind of kingdom prophesied in the OT and expected by Judaism. Part of the reason for the unexpectedness is that the kingdom had begun but was not consummated, and this lack of consummation was to continue on indefinitely. This stands in contrast to OT prophesies of the latter days whose events were predicted to occur all at once at the very end of history.²⁵

²⁴ *A New Testament Biblical Theology: The Unfolding of the Old Testament in the New* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2011), 431.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 431, 527.

Beale suggests that the kingdom will only be consummated when the “entire world will be transformed into a new cosmos where the physical and spiritual realms completely overlap and form one reality.”²⁶

Like Gentry and Wellum, Beale posits an “already/not yet” framework for understanding the kingdom that places the physical aspects of the kingdom first (return from Babylon), with an interval of time in which nothing happens. At the coming of Christ, the spiritual phase of the kingdom begins, effecting an unexpected transformation of the kingdom that exceeds OT understandings. As in Gentry and Wellum’s thesis, Beale relies heavily on Ladd for his “already/not yet” approach to prophetic fulfillment. What is distinct in Beale, however, is the idea that the exile is never over until the new creation. In Gentry and Wellum, the exile terminates at the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Beale’s two stage theory of kingdom fulfillment, with the second stage continuing to the new creation of heaven and earth, contains a period of delay that extends from the edict of Cyrus, the Persian, to the first appearing of Christ. As in Gentry and Wellum, this delay represents a postponement of the fulfillment of the kingdom.

Rikk E. Watt’s and the Isaianic New Exodus

Rikk E. Watts presents a New Exodus schema in his book, *Isaiah’s New Exodus in Mark*,²⁷ that includes the elements of offer, rejection, postponement, and ultimate fulfillment. Although arguing from the assumption of the compositional unity of the book of Isaiah, Watts suggests that Isaiah contains contingencies between its three different times of composition.²⁸

²⁶ Ibid., 433.

²⁷ *Isaiah’s New Exodus in Mark* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000). This section on Rikk E. Watt’s treatment of Mark’s Gospel is a moderately edited section of my dissertation, “A Critique of Rikk E. Watts’ *Isaianic New Exodus* in the Markan Prologue” [Ph.D. diss., Baptist Bible Seminary, 2012], 232-39).

²⁸ Watts assumes multiple authorship, but believes that there is more unity in the prophecy than critical scholars have allowed in the past due to a

The first thirty-nine chapters of Isaiah, although primarily oracles of judgment (some of them directed against Israel), nonetheless promise that Yahweh will redeem a remnant. This consolation appears to be within reach of the nation in chapters 40-55, if only it will receive God's plan of redemption, which includes acceptance of Yahweh's anointed servant, Cyrus. Deeming Yahweh's plan unacceptable, Israel's blind and deaf religious leaders reject Yahweh's wisdom, and his plan seems to languish (40-48). Even though a remnant returned to Jerusalem in response to God's provision through Cyrus, the turn-out was meager at best. Since the nation's response did not meet with Yahweh's expectation of a faithful remnant responding in faith, he "postponed" the proposed new exodus to Jerusalem.

Watts suggests that chapters 49-55 center on this theme of Yahweh's new exodus plan, mediated through the enigmatic servant of the Lord: "Chapters 49-55 then describe how Yahweh's new exodus plan, although postponed as suggested, will be realized through the agency of a new, faithful and suffering servant "Israel" who will deliver Jacob-Israel and execute Yahweh's plan for the nations."²⁹

Although Watts maintains that Second Isaiah³⁰ is unaware of the identity of this mysterious servant, there is no mistaking his function; his atoning suffering and subsequent victory will clearly make the NE possible. He is the one who will provide for a "restored Jerusalem-Zion" to which the nations will come to seek Yahweh.³¹ According to Watts, Isaiah 56:6-8 clearly expresses the global implications of the new exodus.³²

final skillful redactor ("Isaiah" 40-55: Consolation or Confrontation? Isaiah 40-55 and the Delay of the New Exodus," *TynBul* 41 [1990]: 31-59).

²⁹ Ibid., 31.

³⁰ I use the designations, first, second, and third Isaiah (FI, SI, TI) to facilitate discussion, but affirm that an eighth-century prophet named Isaiah wrote all 66 chapters of this book.

³¹ Ibid., 49.

³² "And the foreigners who join themselves to the LORD, to minister to him, to love the name of the LORD, and to be his servants, everyone who keeps the Sabbath and does not profane it, and holds fast my covenant—these I will bring to my holy mountain, and make them joyful in my house of prayer; their burnt offerings and their sacrifices will be accepted on my

Following this, Third Isaiah (56-66), having a post-exilic setting, combines themes of disappointment over Israel's failure to embrace Yahweh's plan for its return under Cyrus with reassuring new exodus statements of a greater redemption for Jerusalem than the nation has ever seen. This enhanced new exodus deliverance replaces the original exodus as the emblem of God's saving grace for his people. As Watts so clearly summarizes, "The goal of the new exodus is the enthronement of Yahweh in a restored Jerusalem-Zion."³³

It is significant to note that as the prophecy advances in the second section of SI (chapters 49-55), a shift of focus occurs. No longer does Yahweh dispute with his people over their rebellious ways. Regarding chapters 49-55, Watts claims there is a "virtual absence" of disputations in this section of SI.³⁴ This absence is significant because not only do the disputations fade from view, but also, so do Cyrus and the anti-idol polemics of earlier chapters. The servant figure, Yahweh's agent of deliverance, becomes the central interest of chapters 49-55. A new plan has been initiated—plan B?

altar; for my house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples." The Lord God, who gathers the outcasts of Israel, declares, "I will gather yet others to him besides those already gathered." See Watts' *Isaiah's New Exodus in Mark*, 318-32, for his approach to the temple cleansing incident, where Jesus cites Isaiah 56:7. Watts suggests that when Jesus focused his attention on cleansing the outer court, the court of the Gentiles, he did so because the religious leaders had hindered the Gentiles from worship. Since Jesus cites Isaiah 56:7 on this occasion, he evokes the inclusive teaching (Jews and Gentiles) of the INE.

³³ Watts, "Consolation," 34.

³⁴ Watts tends to quantify data that would better be qualified. To say that there is a virtual absence of disputations in chapters 49-55 is misleading when there are two key sections, one of them appearing in the epilogue of SI (50:1-3; 55:8-13; Watts calls the second one "brief" although it is longer than the average disputation in chapters 40-48.). Given Watts's insistence on the literary significance of the prologue, middle, and epilogue of a text, it is surprising that he passes over these disputations, deeming them "insignificant."

Postponement of the New Exodus

To summarize, Watts proposes that Isaiah's consolation is initially rejected by Israel, given its poor response to Yahweh's anointed deliverer, Cyrus. The disputations of Isaiah 40-48 catalog Yahweh's case against his people, finally making necessary a new plan. The language of chapters 49-55 shifts to proclamations of salvation, thereby indicating that God's blessing is yet future. This new plan is effected through the enigmatic servant, to be fulfilled at a later time. However, as can be seen in Isaiah 56-66, Israel also refuses the atoning work of the enigmatic servant, thereby postponing Yahweh's new exodus.

Rikk E. Watts assumes a chronological progression based on a compositional framework that begins in the eighth century BC and ends sometime after the exile. If Third Isaiah were not a postexilic writing, it could hardly address the failures of the return of Israel from Babylon to Jerusalem. Lim's assessment of human responses in Watt's view of SI and TI clearly reveals this prophecy/fulfillment problem:

The impression that SI announced a complete fulfillment of Yahweh's salvation promises only to be followed by the disappointment of unfulfilled prophecy resulting in its modification by the addition of TI fails to observe the conflict within SI as well as the theological implications of the theme of fulfillment of God's word (40:8; 55:11).³⁵

Watts' NE framework seems to suggest that Yahweh makes prophetic modifications along the way as Israel responds to his promises to restore the nation since each stage of the progression is dependent on the previous one. The following conditional sequence in Isaiah illustrates the problem of prophecy and fulfillment in Watts' schema:

³⁵ Bo H. Lim, "The 'Way of the Lord' in the Book of Isaiah." (Ph.D. diss., Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, 2006), 137.

Yahweh's Actions	Israel's Responses
God promises a full restoration of Israel, a new exodus (1-39).	Israel rejects God's wisdom, trusting itself (1-39).
Yahweh demonstrates his ability to control history by judging the nations as well as Israel (1-39).	Israel doubts God's wisdom and ability (1-39).
Yahweh hardens Israel's people's hearts (1-39, esp. 6).	Israel chooses to follow idols.
Yahweh comforts Israel and promises a new exodus (40-48).	Israel refuses to trust God.
God provides Cyrus, a deliverer for a new exodus (40-48).	Israel rejects Cyrus, God's instrument of deliverance (40-48).
God disputes with Israel, accusing it of trusting worthless idols (40-48).	Israel returns to Jerusalem in a very meager way (40-48).
God promises a new exodus more glorious than the original one, to be achieved through the righteous Servant of the Lord (49-55).	The people do not believe God (49-55).
God postpones the new exodus (56-66).	The prophet looks forward to the day when the perfect servant brings about the glorious new exodus as described in chapters 1-39.

Without the space of time that is assumed in the composition of Isaiah, it is difficult to imagine Watts's scheme working because of the considerable number of contingencies.³⁶ Yahweh

³⁶ Watts assumes a date for Isaiah 1-39 in the latter part of the eighth century BC, while chapters 40-55 were composed about the middle of the sixth century, with chapters 56-66 being added sometime in the fifth century.

bases his promises in SI on human actions in FI. Likewise, Yahweh bases the content of TI on Israel's responses to God in SI. For instance, Watts opines that the imminent hope of Isaiah 40:1-11 is addressed to the Jews in exile regarding their return to Babylon (exilic audience), but since they are "blind and deaf" to Yahweh's wisdom in using Cyrus, a pagan ruler (expressed in chs. 40-48), they respond meagerly, so the INE is postponed. Isa 56-66 indicates to the next generation of Jews (post-exilic audience) that the INE did not eventuate, while Isaiah 49-55 explains how the new fulfillment will take place, through the work of God's Servant.

The final stage of writing entailed editing of the work as a whole. Therefore, scholars estimate that this writing was produced over a period of nearly three hundred years.

H. G. M. Williamson wrestles with this concept: "If the prophet maintains that certain things which have been prophesied in the past have been accurately fulfilled, so that now one may have confidence in the reliability of the new predictions being made, the argument both presupposes an acceptance of the validity of predictive prophecy, and also demands that the speaker should himself be located after the fulfillment of those predictions" (*The Book Called Isaiah: Deutero-Isaiah's Role in Composition and Redaction* [Oxford: Oxford University P, 1994], 2). Although recent understandings of "compositional unity" in Isaiah seem to improve one's chances of understanding the overall message of the book, challenges related to promise and fulfillment remain. McEvenue observes the hermeneutical challenges for the reader of Isaiah: "The interweaving of texts from the three distinct periods of the book's writing is such that it is no longer acceptable to interpret the book in three parts. All three parts are hermeneutically present in each part. This is complex literature, requiring complexity in the reader." See also W. A. M. Beuken, "Isaiah Chapters LXV-LXVI: Trito-Isaiah and the Closure of the Book of Isaiah," in *The Congress Volume: Leuven 1989*, ed. J. A. Emerton, 204-21, VTSup 43 (Leiden: Brill, 1991); Rendtorff, "Book of Isaiah," 8-20; and J. A. Motyer, *The Prophecy of Isaiah* (Downers Grove, IL, 2003), 25-29. Carroll suggests that human response in salvation oracles may result in situations that are different from their expectations (*When Prophecy Failed* [London: SCM P, 1979], 140). He claims that the Babylonian captivity caused prophecy to collapse, as the people felt that Yahweh's promises to preserve Zion had failed. Second Isaiah's message, then, was one of adjusting prophecy to the reality of Israel's failure (ibid., 150-56).

One wonders, then, if one could adapt Watts's reading of Isaiah to the traditional view of authorship that places the entire book under the pen of an eighth century prophet. Bowman, furthermore, points out the insurmountable interpretive difficulty of the first century reader of Isaiah (i.e., Mark), who most certainly would not have known Duhm's hypothesis.³⁷

We may summarize Watts's approach to the prophecy and fulfillment of Israel's restoration. Over a period of more than 300 years, Yahweh offers to restore his people Israel so that they can enjoy his favor and be a blessing to the nations. In response to each offer, Israel rejects Yahweh's plan in favor of its own way, thereby postponing the new exodus. Unlike Gentry, Wellum, and Beale, Watts frequently speaks of the postponement of Yahweh's new exodus plan. Therefore, one may summarize that Watts's thesis contains an offer, rejection of the offer, and finally a postponement of the plan which indicates an interval of time between the offer and the fulfillment of the prophecy.

Although Watts's theory is widely accepted by evangelical scholars, no one seems to be concerned about his postponement hypothesis.³⁸ Likewise, few exhibit concern over his multi-author view of the writing of Isaiah. Yet as previously noted, without the space of time given for the composition of Isaiah in three distinct time periods of Israel's history, Watts's thesis fails. Furthermore, one might add that according to Watts, had Israel accepted the original offer from Yahweh as recorded in Isaiah, then the new exodus would have been fulfilled in that era.

Conclusion

I have endeavored in this article to show how nondispensationalists interpret postponement language related to the kingdom's delay. I have also demonstrated to a limited extent

³⁷ *The Gospel of Mark: The Christian Jewish Passover Haggadah*, StPB 8 (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1965), 62.

³⁸ This is especially evident in that he was selected to write the chapter on Mark's Gospel in the widely used, *Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament* ("Mark," edited by G. K. Beale and D. A. Carson, 111-249 [Grand Rapids: Baker, 2007]). See also Paul S. Coxon, *Exploring the New Exodus in John: A Biblical Theological Investigation of John, Chapters 5-10* (Eugene, OR: Resource Publications, 2014), 122.

how traditional dispensationalists are themselves cautious about how they use postponement language. From a divine perspective, no postponement occurs. However, the concept is helpful for traditional dispensationalists because it indicates that the Davidic kingdom is not being partially fulfilled during the church age. Finally, this paper has presented clear examples which non-dispensationalists tend to agree that there is an offer from God, a rejection by his people, and then an interval between its offer and its fulfillment. In the instance of the conquest of the promised-land, all would agree that there was a forty-year postponement of the promise's fulfillment. No one would consider this "Plan B." Furthermore, the New Exodus approaches of Gentry, Wellum, Beale, and Watts indicate that arguments that support various non-dispensational hermeneutical frameworks contain elements of prophetic delay, yet no critique on this point occurs in scholarly literature. Perhaps the scholarly analysis has been postponed for another time.

Jesus as the True Vine: A Transition of Economies Announced at John 15

Corey M. Marsh

A survey of mainline Johannine sources written on Jesus' self-predicated "I Am" declarations in the fourth gospel reveals a notable problem: His final one, the "true vine" statement of John 15, is the one ἐγὼ εἶμι out of the group that is afforded the least amount of attention by NT scholars. Moreover, the gospel of John itself often suffers neglect from scholarship regarding its notion of economical transitions or dispensational shifts, a feature more customarily treated in the synoptics (specifically Matthew and Luke). Further, there is a notable gap in biblical scholarship related to the use of positive vine texts depicting national Israel's hopeful future. Rather, OT texts depicting judgment on faithless Israel are customary when comparing vine imagery to Israel.

In an effort to address these lacunae, this article seeks to fill the void left by the customary glossing over of John 15:1, 5. It suggests the reason for the neglect of scholarly treatments of these two critical verses may be due to vine/vineyard imagery being the most pointed OT depiction of national Israel and the Jewish people. As such, through analysis of the text and related passages, this article will demonstrate that at John 15, an announcement is made concerning identities and roles which have direct bearing on the relationship between Israel and the (future) church. To put it succinctly, the argument advanced is that at John 15 Jesus announces a dispensational shift to be led

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by the Spirit-indwelt church without collapsing the permanence and glorious future of national Israel. As such, a transition of economies seems to be at play in John's gospel which has gone largely unnoticed in Johannine studies.

An Economical Transition Anticipated

Matthew is often considered the most "Jewish" of the gospels due to its emphasis of Jesus' messiah-kingship over the Jewish nation.² Yet, the fourth gospel is not without its own unique presentation of Jesus' kingly rule over Israel. In fact, John wastes no time highlighting this, as seen in Nathaniel's early declaration that Jesus is "the Son of God and King of Israel" (John 1:49). Further, while the synoptics are perhaps more comprehensive in their treatment of Jesus' role as teacher viz., highlighting his discourses, John demonstrates a broader role for Christ—he is the divine λόγος who enveloped himself in flesh (1:14). Christ's dual traits—divine personhood and relationship with Israel—are what set the tone for his final self-predication at John 15, a text steeped in imagery from OT passages depicting national Israel as a vine.

One prominent feature exclusive to John's account is Jesus' seven Ἐγώ Εἰμι ("I Am") declarations, which help form its structure. Jesus' specific purpose in John 15 sets this last declaration apart from the other six, providing wider significance for biblical and theological studies. Specifically, phrases such as "true vine," "the vine dresser," and "the branches" in verses 1 and 5 relate to Jesus', His Father's, and the church's identities and roles as one world-economy transitions to another. By way of Christ's final "I Am" declaration and accompanying viticulture illustration, Jesus contrasted himself with national Israel while simultaneously identifying his disciples as distinct, yet related entities who should expect a shift in economies with the coming of the Holy Spirit.

² Calling attention to the undeniable Jewishness of Matthew, D. A. Carson and Douglas J. Moo state, "Since the book betrays so many Jewish features, it is not easy to imagine that the author had a *predominantly* Gentile audience in mind" (*Introduction to the New Testament* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005], 156).

This economical transition, largely unnoticed in Johannine studies, would later find its tangible expression in the church—the germinal form of which was comprised of Jesus’ sole audience that fateful night, fittingly identified as “the branches.” As such, Jesus does not fulfill or replace national Israel. Rather, his final “I Am” declaration was an illustration used to highlight the contrast between himself as the ever-faithful Israelite and that of unfaithful national Israel, which endlessly wandered under the law. Further, by drawing on the hopeful vineyard language used in Isaiah 27, the economical shift announced in John 15:1, 5 serves to underscore national Israel’s security and future as a covenanted people.

An Economical Transition Announced

Jesus’ final ἐγώ εἰμι declaration in John 15 appears, on the surface, to be anticlimactic. Perhaps this is because the predicate noun Jesus used to complete this statement, “the vine,” is not as universal or awe-inspiring as the others—such as Jesus being “the light of the world” (John 8:12), “the resurrection and the life” (11:25), or his penultimate, “the way, the truth, and the life” (14:6). By contrast, the imagery used in John 15:1, 5—significantly, given the night of Jesus’ betrayal and arrest—is tailored specifically to the Jewish people as Jesus declared himself to be ἡ ἀμπελος ἡ ἀληθινή (the true vine). While some debate exists as to what Jesus was referring with his use of “vine,”³ the general consensus among evangelical scholars is that vine imagery is a Jewish expression used to describe the nation of Israel (Ps 80:8) as well as her expected Messiah (Gen 49:22–24). As such, Jesus’ final “I Am” is steeped in OT backgrounds.

In addition to Jesus identifying himself as the *true* vine (or genuine Israel), He also provides another identifier to depict the

³ For instance, Rudolf Bultmann viewed Jesus’ vine imagery as alluding to the tree of life in Eden (Gen 2:9). Bultmann does this by appealing to Gnostic, Mandaean sources. See Colin Brown, ed. *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1981), s.v. “Vine, Wine, ἀμπελος.”

disciples remaining with him. These were the very disciples who comprised the incipient church, which would later be birthed by the Holy Spirit in Acts 2. In John 15:5, Jesus labels those who follow him, κλήματα (branches), and commands them to μένω (abide) in him, thereby disclosing a sharp distinction between himself as Israel, and them as something distinct who are to maintain an intimate relationship with Israel.

That Jesus uttered this declaration specifically on the last night of his teaching ministry and directly between his prophecies of the coming Holy Spirit yields a fascinating inference: a new era was dawning in which the Spirit would accomplish what Israel never could. It is here where a unique understanding of inaugurated eschatology is discovered. Rather than assuming the Davidic kingdom had been inaugurated in John's gospel, a position made popular by progressive dispensationalists, this study sees Jesus' statement(s) as inaugurating or introducing a new economy, which furthers world history toward end-time events. A transition from law to grace is illustrated here—not one of law to kingdom.

Additionally, it is worth noting a simple but often overlooked fact: This statement is the only one of the seven Jesus uttered that included his "Father" (ὁ πατήρ μου). Thus, the unit of thought includes *three* role-identities rather than two: Jesus = the vine; the Father = the vinedresser; and the disciples = the branches. Jesus' including his Father highlights a transitional economy being declared, and the Father's role in it supplies the key to other texts which support a dispensational understanding regarding the future kingdom (e.g., Acts 1:3, 6).

Jesus elsewhere described the Father as "greater than I" (John 14:28), as it is he who sovereignly planned and controls all of history. As Haenchen has remarked, Jesus "placed himself entirely in the service of the Father.... He gave himself over entirely to what the Father has affected in him."⁴ It is the Father to whom Jesus submits all things and it is from the Father that

⁴ Ernst Haenchen, *John 2: A Commentary on the Gospel of John, Chapters 7-21*, Hermeneia: A Critical and Historical Commentary on the Bible (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984), 131.

Jesus receives his literal messianic reign (cf. Dan 7:9–14; Rev 5:9–13).

Unbalanced Portrayal of Vine Imagery

Scholars have traditionally limited OT textual support connoting specific vine imagery to selective uses of pessimistic portrayals of Israel being a vine or vineyard. The customary texts used for support of this negative portrayal are Psalm 80:8–16; Isaiah 5:1–7; Jeremiah 2:21; 12:10; Ezekiel 15:1–8; 17:1–10; 19:10–14; and Hosea 10:1–2.⁵ This trend has never been seriously altered. To this, Grant Taylor points out, “Johannine scholarship remains focused upon the OT texts surveyed, which connote God’s people under judgment.”⁶ Because the vine imagery which Jesus uses is customarily thought to refer only to *negative* portrayals of national Israel, generally only these OT passages are used for textual support. Thus, scholars’ presuppositions are often fueling the use of evidence favoring their predetermined results.⁷ This hermeneutical blunder is common, especially when it concerns Israel.

⁵ It is these specific OT passages connoting *judgment* upon Israel that have historically (virtually exclusively) been used by scholars in their treatment of John 15—from the 5th to 21st centuries. See, for example, Augustine, *Lectures or Tractates on the Gospel of St. John* 80.2 (NPNF, 7:344); B. F. Westcott, *The Gospel According to St. John: The Authorized Version with Introduction and Notes* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1958), 216–17; George R. Beasley-Murray, *John*, WBC (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1999), 272; D. A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 513; John C. Hutchinson, “The Vine in John 15 and Old Testament Imagery in the ‘I AM’ Statements,” *BSac* 168 (January–March 2011): 68–69. To his credit, Hutchinson does provide a few brief comments on Isaiah 27:2–6, a positive vine-text depicting a future prosperity for Israel.

⁶ Grant D. Taylor, “The Fruitful Vineyard of God, Jesus and His Disciples at John 15:1–7” (Ph.D. diss., Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2014), 3.

⁷ For a recent dissertation exposing just how pervasive presuppositions are within biblical theology, see Edward J. Herrelko III, “The Role of Presuppositions and Their Impact on The Process of Biblical Theology: A Case Study of The Pauline Theologies of James Dunn and Thomas Schreiner” (Ph.D. diss., Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2016).

The historic tendency of applying only these judgment vine-imagery texts as the OT background to Jesus' final ἐγώ εἰμι seems to be the mainstay in Johannine scholarship. Due to the negative portrayal of Israel in these texts, a false notion that Israel has been rejected by God for a permanent replacement or fulfillment with either Jesus or the church, has been commonly assumed by scholars.⁸ This assumption must be challenged.

It is, of course, important to consider the relevance of these OT judgment-vine texts. Taylor reminds his readers that "each of the texts contains legitimate verbal and conceptual connections to John 15:1–17."⁹ Yet, their exclusive placement as the backdrop to John 15 leaves an unbalanced portrayal. While these negative OT vine passages provide a striking contrast to Jesus' claim of being ἡ ἀμπελος ἡ ἀληθινὴ (the True Vine), their exclusive usage does not complete Jesus' entire illustration. There are other remarkably positive and hopeful OT vine/vineyard texts which depict Israel as having a glorious future.¹⁰ For example, Isaiah 27:1–6 predicts a restoration of national Israel in dramatic vineyard imagery:

In that day the LORD with his hard and great and strong sword will punish Leviathan the fleeing serpent, Leviathan the twisting serpent, and he will slay the dragon that is in the sea. In that day,

⁸ E.g., John Calvin, *Commentary on the Book of the Prophet Isaiah 1–32*, Calvin's Commentaries, 22 vols., trans. William Pringle (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998), 7:170; Edward J. Young, *The Book of Isaiah*, NICOT, 3 vols. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1972), 1:197; cf. Thomas Schreiner, *Romans*, BECNT (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1998), 396; For excellent counterviews demonstrating the future restoration and salvation of national Israel, see Walter P Olson, "The Future of The Nation Israel According To The Book of Romans," *Central Bible Quarterly* 10, no.1 (Spring 1967): 3–34; and, Jim R. Sibley, "Has the Church Put Israel on the Shelf? The Evidence from Romans 11:15," *JETS* 58, no. 3 (September 2015): 571–81.

⁹ Taylor, "Fruitful Vineyard of God," 3.

¹⁰ For a distinctly Jewish and novel interpretation of John 15 that sees Genesis 49:22 as the premier positive vine-text providing the background for Jesus' illustration, see Eli Lizorkin-Eyzenberg, *The Jewish Gospel of John: Discovering Jesus, the King of Israel* (Tel Mond, Israel: Israel Study Center, 2015), 216–20.

“A pleasant vineyard, sing of it! I, the LORD, am its keeper; every moment I water it. Lest anyone punish it, I keep it night and day; I have no wrath. Would that I had thorns and briers to battle! I would march against them, I would burn them up together. Or let them lay hold of my protection, let them make peace with me, let them make peace with me.” In days to come Jacob shall take root, Israel shall blossom and put forth shoots and fill the whole world with fruit.

According to this passage, national Israel has a future as a “pleasant vineyard” (בְּרֵם חֶמֶר) beyond the days of Jesus’ earthly ministry.¹¹ The hopeful promise of this text precludes any notion of God’s replacement of national Israel. As such, focusing solely on negative Israel-vine texts leaves an unbalanced portrayal. Indeed, passages such as Isaiah 27 must be considered when evaluating Jesus’ declaration.

As it stands, Taylor is among the few who make this connection. Instead of proposing the “good Israel” (Christ) replacing the “bad Israel” (nation)—Taylor sees a distinct correspondence between the vine text of Isaiah 27, which speaks about Israel’s future restoration, and John 15.¹² Accordingly, Taylor suggests, “The poet of Isa 27:6 looks forward to the eschatological day about which Yahweh has just sung (Isa 27:2–5).... When this occurs the 12 tribes of Jacob–Israel will one day be restored in the land and will be joined by sojourners who together become the one ‘house of Jacob.’”¹³ This writer agrees with Taylor’s assessment of the biblical connection to a future restoration of Israel. Indeed, the eschatological renewal of Israel in Isaiah 27 is vital to understanding Jesus’ vine analogy. Taylor correctly assesses that both judgment *and* restoration texts regarding Israel play prominent roles in John 15: 1, 5.¹⁴

¹¹ NET Notes point out: “Many medieval MSS read בְּרֵם חֶמֶר (“vineyard of wine”) i.e., “a productive vineyard” (NET Bible, study note at Isa 27:2).

¹² Taylor, “Fruitful Vineyard of God,” 84–108.

¹³ Ibid., 99, 101.

¹⁴ Ibid., 108.

However, whereas Taylor believes the main thrust of John 15 is to show that “Yahweh’s vineyard will be renewed in his Messiah, Jesus, and the disciples who abide in him”¹⁵ as a fulfillment of prophecy, this writer believes that a distinct, yet close relationship exists between Jesus, the church, and national Israel—with a transitioning of dispensations being announced at John 15. Rather than serving as a fulfillment or even an inauguration of prophecy, Jesus’ final ἐγώ εἰμι is intended to highlight a transition in God’s economy. This emphasis is the result of an interpretive methodology that remains consistently normative, or literal, when applied to either descriptive or prophetic portions of OT and NT vine texts.¹⁶

Uniqueness of John 15:1, 5

The purpose of John 15:1–5 is to highlight Jesus’ final self-predicated ἐγώ εἰμι viz., that he is ἡ ἀμπελος ἡ ἀληθινὴ (the true Vine)—a symbol used of national Israel (e.g., Isa 5:1–2). Although Jesus may be the ultimate correspondent to Israel who ensures national Israel will remain, a new age was dawning that would change Israel’s relationship with God. As Jesus made this declaration, the disciples were to continue to trust in Christ as the absolute Israel who is loved by the Father, the eternal cultivator or “vinedresser” (ὁ γεωργός). Thus, John 15:1–5 highlights Jesus’ final “I Am” statement demonstrating the he alone is the true vine, his Father is the sovereign cultivator, and true disciples are those who μένω (abide) or utterly depend on him for life.

Jesus’ “I Am” statements not only use metaphors to bring his identity to the fore, but also specifically underscore his role. For example, David Ball observes,

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ While this article focuses on biblical vine/vineyard imagery used as metaphorical depictions of national Israel, it should be noted that not all appearances of the word group are used in such a way. Though an exhaustive treatment reaches beyond the scope of this article, it is understood that various uses of “vine” and “vineyard” do occur in the OT with single-intended meanings depicting general agricultural or viticulture images without any theological or metaphorical undertones (e.g., Judg 9:27; 1 Kgs 21:1; Jer 31:5; Jas 3:12, et al.).

[T]he “I am” sayings with an image should be seen as emphasizing Jesus’ identity in relation to his role (for others), while the other “I am” sayings should be seen as emphasizing Jesus’ identity in itself. In other words, while the “I am” sayings without a predicate are primarily concerned with who Jesus is [e.g., John 8:58], those with a predicate are primarily concerned with what Jesus does. . . . It is only because of who Jesus is that he is able to fulfill the role which he has.¹⁷

There is a sense in which all seven of Jesus’ ἐγώ εἰμι statements reveal aspects of his deity and also highlight his comparative and contrastive relation through OT metaphors depicting messianic identities.¹⁸ Yet, it is Jesus’ role as the “true vine” that sets off his final “I Am” statement from the others, due to its overtly nationalistic metaphor. Thus, John 15:1, 5 is unique in this regard, as it is the only one in which Jesus uses an explicit depiction of national Israel, יִשְׂרָאֵל / ἄμπελος (vine). Hutchinson suggests, “Jesus’ claim was not just identity with any vine. Rather, He is the *true* or *genuine* one, the messianic fulfillment of Old Testament imagery.”¹⁹ In addition, four other points may be considered that enforce the uniqueness of this particular pericope, especially as it relates to economical or dispensational implications.

Enveloped by the Coming Spirit

The true vine analogy at John 15 is unique for several reasons, including its placement in John’s Gospel. The public ministry of Jesus ends in John 12 before his final Passover celebration. Up to that point, many of the people believed in Jesus, but their fear of the Pharisees kept them from publicly

¹⁷ David Mark Ball, “‘I Am’ in John’s Gospel: Literary Function, Background and Theological Implications,” *JSNT Supplement Series* 124 (Sheffield, UK: Sheffield Academic P, 1996), 174–75.

¹⁸ Specifically, “I am the bread of life” (6:35, 48); “I am the light of the world” (8:12; 9:5); “I am the gate for the sheep” (10:8); “I am the good shepherd” (10:11, 14)—all of which contain rich OT correspondence.

¹⁹ Hutchinson, “Vine in John 15,” 64.

announcing their faith (John 12:43). With this scene, all of Jesus' preaching, teaching, and healing, performed in places where he was able to freely move about, comes to an end. The story then shifts from Jesus' public ministry to one of privacy with only His twelve disciples (13–17), after which He is betrayed and arrested. Concerning this transition, Rudolf Bultmann observed, "[Jesus] is no longer now the one who stands in the struggle, but the one who speaks to his own, i.e. to his own community."²⁰ During these final discussions with the disciples, Jesus announces two major events germane to the current paper: the coming of the Holy Spirit and that he himself is the "true vine."

Jesus promises the coming of the Holy Spirit in only two places in John: chapters 14 and 16. As such, an *inclusio* of sorts is present within this section of Jesus' upper room discourse, framed by the Spirit's future role to initiate a new economy. In John 14, Jesus describes the Holy Spirit as ἄλλον παράκλητον (another helper) who will be with the disciples forever (John 14:17).²¹ Two chapters later, John records Jesus promising to send the Holy Spirit specifically to the disciples after His ascension (16:7). He then describes the Spirit's coming ministry in the world (vv. 8–11). What is significant to grasp about these two prophetic chapters regarding the coming Spirit is the fact that Jesus' final "I Am" in John 15:1, 5 is set directly in between them. The context of these chapters reveals that a new relationship between the Jewish disciples of Israel and their God was on the horizon. Later revelation reveals this new relationship occurred when the Spirit birthed the church in Acts 2. Charles Smith observes,

This relationship was soon to assume a new form in that He was leaving, but the Holy Spirit would come as His Representative.

²⁰ Rudolf Bultmann, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary*, trans. G. R. Beasley-Murray, R. W. N. Hoare, and J. K. Riches (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster P, 1976), 458.

²¹ This is not the place to explore the variant differences between the future ἔσται (he will be) and the present ἐστίν (he is) except to say this author believes the future tense has stronger support. For an excellent treatment on the matter, see James M. Hamilton, Jr., "He Is with You and He Will Be in You" (Ph.D. diss., Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2003), 213–20.

With the arrival of the Holy Spirit there was to begin a new and vital relationship (John 14). The parable of John 15:1–8 was given at this point in His instruction, in order to illustrate this new relationship.²²

Thus, by emphasizing the context of chapter 15 in John's gospel, a dispensational shift becomes readily apparent. This was not lost on J. N. Darby who stated, "In chapters 15, 16 [of John] you get the distinct dispensations—Christ the true Vine on earth, and then the Comforter come on earth sent down by the exalted Christ."²³ That Jesus' final ἐγώ εἰμι, a statement dripping with imagery depicting national Israel, is enveloped by His prophecies concerning the Spirit who will birth the church exposes a stunning shift in God's economy.

Illustration, not Fulfillment

While Jesus' words in John 15:1, 5 may carry type/antitype undertones, a feature addressed later, it is important to note that the entire chapter lacks any explicit "fulfillment" terminology—such as the verb πληρόω or its cognates.²⁴ It is therefore best not to describe this pericope as a specific fulfillment of OT messianic vine imagery, but rather, view it as Jesus highlighting his personal correspondence to ancient "vine" depictions.²⁵ Thus, the language Jesus uses at John 15:1, 5 (vine, vine-dresser, branch) is for *illustrative purposes* unique to national Israel and the Jewish people, not as exact fulfillment of OT prophecy. Indeed,

²²Charles R. Smith, "The Unfruitful Branches in John 15," *Grace Journal* 9 (Spring 1968): 4.

²³ John Nelson Darby, *Synopsis of the Books of the Bible: Matthew–John*, vol. 3 (London, UK: Cooper and Budd, 1949), 379.

²⁴ For the various NT uses of πληρόω in respect to OT prophecy, see Charles H. Dyer, "Biblical Meaning of Fulfillment," in *Issues in Dispensationalism*, ed. Wesley R. Willis, John R. Master, and Charles Ryrie (Chicago, IL: Moody, 1994), 51–71.

²⁵ Contra John C. Hutchinson, who at first explicitly calls the passage a "messianic fulfillment of Old Testament imagery" (64), but later concludes it "is *much like* the fulfillment of a *type* [emphasis added]," ("Vine in John 15," 79. This comment provides good evidence that fulfillment and typological language is used rather loosely in biblical scholarship.

Jesus' final self-predication in John 15 is set apart from the others due to its uniquely corporate Israelite connotation.

By Jesus employing a metaphor from the Jewish Scriptures and applying it to himself, he highlights his messianic credentials to his immediate Jewish audience: "The messianic campaign of Jesus in the territories of Israel," argues Don Trest, "required that He present before the people of Israel certain messianic qualifications authenticating His messianic claim."²⁶ Jesus' analogy exposes himself as the true and qualified "Israel" who restores national Israel and shines as a beacon of light for the nations (Isa 49:3–6). As the "true vine," Jesus' messianic credentials reach their peak—but by way of illustration—not fulfillment.²⁷

Charles Dyer cautions against viewing such a NT analogy as specifically depicting a fulfillment of OT prophecy: "Analogous language by itself is too imprecise to serve as a guide to the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecies."²⁸ As such, a NT author can employ familiar OT language for literary purposes depicting something other than fulfillment. "New Testament writers," continues Dyer, often "quote or allude to Old Testament people, events, and actions and use them to illustrate their own messages to the church.... One cannot determine the fulfillment of Bible prophecy merely on the basis of New Testament allusions to the Old Testament."²⁹ This is germane to the discussion at hand

²⁶ Don Trest, "The Distinctive Sonship Soteriology of Jesus in the Fourth Gospel, Part 1," *Journal of Dispensational Theology* 20, no. 60 (Summer 2016): 150.

²⁷ This idea contrasts with Progressive Covenantalist Brent E. Parker, who states, "The prophecy of the restoration of the vine through a son, the king, is fulfilled in Jesus" ("The Israel-Christ-Church Relationship," in *Progressive Covenantalism: Charting a Course Between Dispensational and Covenantal Theologies*, ed. Stephen J. Wellum and Brent E. Parke [Nashville: B&H, 2016], 62). As the current section demonstrates, in John 15 Jesus is not himself a fulfillment of prophecy; rather, Jesus is employing a viticulture analogy or illustration. Thus, his words at John 15:1, 5 are analogical, not typological or fulfillment.

²⁸ Dyer, "Biblical Meaning of Fulfillment," 61.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

because nothing in Jesus' vine illustration demands a "fulfillment."

The position offered here is that Jesus' final ἐγώ εἰμι is better seen as a vivid illustration enveloped in rich OT metaphor rather than any specific fulfillment. As such, all entities involved in the analogy remain distinct and permanent: Jesus, the Father, Israel, and the church (in germinal form).³⁰ Further, Jesus' illustration had the purpose of evoking vine imagery in the disciples' minds, causing them to grasp the analogy's national significance along with the changing of relationship.

Understanding Jesus' words as an extended metaphor or illustration rather than a "fulfillment" bars any notion that literal Israel has no future in God's plans. Like Dyer, David Mappes cautions his readers regarding the use of "fulfillment formula" so often preferred by non-literal Bible interpreters: "The use of the fulfillment formula in the NT is simply too broad to suggest that its mere appearance indicates a historical completion of a prophetic promise. The context and use of each passage must be compared to the antecedent historical promise to validate a fulfilled promise."³¹ Because of texts such as Isaiah 27—that prophesy a future restoration of God's "vineyard," Israel (cf. vv. 2, 6, 12)—the mere appearance of vine imagery here does not necessitate any fulfillment of the nation; indeed, it cannot.

This is in keeping with Israel's election as spoken by the prophets (Deut 7:6; Isa 45:4; Jer 31:35–37) and confirmed by the apostle Paul (Rom 9–11). If a fulfillment had taken place in John

³⁰ The term "germinal" is borrowed from James I. Fazio, *Two Commissions: Two Missionary Mandates in Matthew's Gospel* (El Cajon, CA: SCS P, 2015). Fazio employs this term in regard to the first commission Jesus gave his disciples in Matthew 10 and describes it as "the germ or seed form of the gospel which Christ first preached before He was laid into the earth, and which afterward bore much fruit (John 12:24)" (30–31). While the current work deals with a different biblical context than Fazio's research, this writer uses his helpful term "germinal" to refer to the *incipient* or *seed* form of the church, an entity that would not be actualized until the day of Pentecost in Acts 2. At the point of Jesus' declaration in John 15, the church existed in "germinal form," i.e., solely in the remaining disciples.

³¹ David Mappes, "Literal Interpretation and Theological Method: What Is It and How to Do It?," *Ariel Ministries Magazine* (Winter 2017): 21.

15, a valid argument would indeed be that national Israel has been “completed” as part of God’s plan for the nation.³² However, since no fulfillment was announced nothing in the text warrants concluding that national Israel is swallowed up into completion with Jesus’ illustration.

That said, if a “fulfillment” in some sense had truly taken place with Jesus’ true vine analogy, a case could be made that he fulfilled *Judaism* as a religion rather than national Israel. This is an option presented by N. T. Wright who states, “That which Judaism had thought to find in Torah is truly found in Jesus.”³³ Others have likewise promoted such a concept.³⁴ Yet, as Michael Vlach points out: “The NT reaffirms Israel’s election as the reason God can never remove or replace Israel.”³⁵ National Israel’s future is secured in the God who does not revoke his promises (cf. Rom 11:29).

Vine(-yard) Language

D. A. Carson has pointed out that vines were among the most common motifs in ancient religions: “Vine imagery is so common in the ancient world,” he wrote, “that scholars have been able to discover parallels they find in a compelling wide range of literature—in Gnosticism, the Mandaean corpus, Philo, the

³² Michael J. Vlach labels this as a type of replacement theology called “economic supersessionism,” which “focuses on God’s plan in history for the people of God to transfer from an ethnic group (Israel) to a universal group not based on ethnicity (church). In other words, God planned from the beginning for Israel’s role as the people of God to expire with the coming of Christ and the establishment of the church” (*Has the Church Replaced Israel?: A Theological Evaluation* [Nashville: B&H, 2010], 14).

³³ N. T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992), 414.

³⁴ For example, this is the route also chosen by Werner Georg Kümmel, *Introduction to the New Testament*, trans. Howard Clark Kee (New York: Abingdon, 1975), 229: “Though J[oh]n seeks in this way to show Jesus as the fulfillment of Judaism, as well as the true pagan religion, the missionary quality is wholly lacking in J[oh]n.” Although it is not the point of the current article, Kümmel’s anti-missionary claim here is contrary to Köstenberger’s published works on the topic.

³⁵ Vlach, “Has the Church Replaced Israel?,” 200.

literature of Palestinian Judaism, and more.”³⁶ Carson’s point notwithstanding, that Jesus had specific vine/vineyard imagery derived from the *Old Testament* depicting national Israel as his point-of-reference is easily inferred by the frequency in which John appeals to specific OT passages throughout his account.

For Jesus to call himself ἡ ἄμπελος ἡ ἀληθινή (the true Vine), he was undoubtedly intending both to highlight and contrast himself with the symbol most prevalent for national Israel. Contrary to Vincent who states, “The vine was a symbol of the ancient church,”³⁷ Charles Smith captures well the importance of *Israel’s national identity as a vine*, linking it to John 15:

A careful study of the passage clearly indicates that Jesus did have in mind the familiar Old Testament usage of the vine as a symbol of Israel. This symbol was well-known to all Jews. Everyone knew of the temple-vine already mentioned and they no doubt had been taught from childhood the significance of this symbol. The vine was the recognized emblem of the nation Israel just as the eagle is the recognized emblem of the United States. During the Maccabean period the figure of a vine was stamped on the coins of the Jewish nation.³⁸

The grapevine in particular had a prominent place among decorations for the temple. Josephus described the temple as having “a golden vine, with its branches hanging down [from above the front doors and embroidered veils] from a great height, the largest and fine workmanship.”³⁹ Elsewhere, Josephus said these golden vines had “clusters of grapes hung as tall as a man’s

³⁶ Carson, *Gospel According to John*, 513.

³⁷ Marvin R. Vincent, *Vincent’s Word Studies in the New Testament* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1985), 2:249. Vine’s statement is assumed, never demonstrated.

³⁸ Charles R. Smith, “The Unfruitful Branches in John 15,” 5; Further, Allen C. Meyers, ed., in *Eerdmans Bible Dictionary*, s.v. “Vine, Vineyard,” states plainly, “In the Old Testament the vine is a rich symbol for Israel.”

³⁹ Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews*, 15.11.3.

height.”⁴⁰ With the temple scene of grape vineyards across the Kidron Valley as probable backdrops, Jesus’ declaration that he is truly ἡ ἄμπελος must have been striking for the Jewish disciples since they had a tangible reference point for comparison.⁴¹ Grammatically, this articular noun being placed immediately after the ἐγώ εἰμι phrase, and yet before the following predicate adjective ἡ ἀληθινὴ (the true), serves to underscore Jesus’ intended emphasis—it is he and he alone who is the vine, no other candidate will do.

Several features are included in John 15 to help support one main purpose: Jesus Christ is the premier model of everything Israel was meant to be. By way of analysis applied to Jesus’ statement at John 15:1, 5, the argument advanced throughout is that Jesus being ἡ ἄμπελος ἡ ἀληθινὴ (the true Vine) is not only a declaration of deity, but also conveys his connection to national Israel and their changing relationship with him. This new relationship was about to be formalized into the body of Christ, the church, which Jesus anticipated with the promise of the Holy Spirit.

⁴⁰ Josephus, *Wars of the Jews*, 5.5.4.

⁴¹ It is worth noting that Rudolf Bultmann does not see any tangible comparison between Jesus’ illustration and grape vines in the immediate area: “The absence of any particle of comparison, the definite article, and the term ἀληθ[*sic*] all show that there is no comparison or parable, such as might have been suggested by the sight of a vine climbing up the side of the house or of the golden vine over the Temple gate” (*The Gospel of John*, 529n.4.). Although Bultmann admittedly draws solid grammatical points, the argument addressed in this thesis is in no way dependent on physical grape vines being present as a point of immediate reference in Jesus’ analogy. Rather, in his viticulture illustration, Jesus used the word ἄμπελος (vine) as metaphor depicting *national Israel* which supplied the main point of comparison, not any nearby physical objects (even if nearby grapevines provided Jesus a tangible expression of the metaphor). Indeed, Bultmann himself concedes to this point: “But naturally the title ἄμπελος, like ποιμήν in chp. 10, presents the opportunity of appending metaphorical and comparative discourse” (ibid.).

While temporary Israel may fail, the eternal Israel does not. And the disciples are given a powerful glimpse concerning a new era that was dawning (the church), and their intimate relationship with its head. By drawing on language befitting of Israel's viticulture, Jesus emphasized that he is, and always had been, the only genuine vine; the Jewish disciples are connected to him as τὰ κλήματα (the branches).

The disciples, representing the incipient church, were not the vine—that right belonged exclusively to Jesus. This is contrary to Robert Gundry who sees no distinction between Jesus as the vine and the disciples as the branches: “Now that Israel has been set aside because of their rejection of Jesus, he *and those who abide in him become the new and true vine* of God's planting. Jesus is the whole vine, not just the stem, so that as branches those who abide in him are not merely connected to him; *they are absorbed by him* [emphasis added].”⁴² Yet the distinction Jesus makes between Himself as a vine and the disciples as the branches is as sharp as Paul's description of the branches and the root in Romans 9; these distinctions need to be accounted for and not merely thought of as synonymous or “absorption.” It seems Robert Gromacki comes closer to the point: “Christ first of all depicted the new relationship that would exist between Him and the disciples in the metaphor of the vine and the branches.”⁴³ The new relationship would be intimate, yet distinct. Thus, any theology that proposes the church has replaced national Israel is aberrant to John 15.⁴⁴

⁴² Robert H. Gundry, *A Survey of the New Testament*, 4th ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), 284.

⁴³ Robert G. Gromacki, *New Testament Survey* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1974), 145.

⁴⁴ For more on the grammatical and biblical significance of κλήματα (“branches”) see, Cory M. Marsh, “The True Vine: An Analysis of Jesus’ Final Self-Predicated ‘I Am’ and Consideration of its Dispensational Implication” (Th.M. thesis, Southern California Seminary, 2018). Theological Research Exchange Network.

Type–Antitype Correspondence

One argument of this article is that a fulfillment of prophecy had not taken place with Jesus' final predicated ἐγώ εἰμι statement. Rather, Jesus being the "true vine" was a comparative illustration with national Israel as the original referent. Yet, this scene marks what some believe to be a *typological fulfillment*. For instance, Hutchison suggests that, "Jesus was contrasting Himself to another earlier vine, Israel, and claiming to be the genuine vine—the perfect in place of the imperfect, the fulfillment of the type."⁴⁵ While it seems obvious that Jesus was contrasting himself with the earlier vine Israel, the concept of *type fulfillment* is not so clear. In his monumental *Encyclopedia of Biblical Prophecy*, J. Barton Payne defines *type* as

Stand[ing] in correspondence of the verbalized *figure*, in that it is a predictive symbol or prefiguration that is presented through an independently existing historical reality, just as a figure of speech conveys a second thought that grows out of its accepted common usage. That is to say, the type possess another, separate existence among its immediate contemporaries, even while communicating its developed, God-given truth about the future.⁴⁶

A point to note in Payne's definition is that a type is always an independent existing reality. Nowhere is the notion of cancelation of the original historical reality. A type establishes the physical reality of a *later spiritual* truth; the type's historicity remains untouched. Therefore, as Everette Harrison observed, Jesus being the true (ἀληθινὴ) vine in John 15:1 means he is "real, all that a vine should be in a spiritual sense."⁴⁷

Jesus' intention was to highlight a spiritual truth connected to historical Israel. Yet, historical Israel has always remained

⁴⁵ Hutchison, "Vine in John 15," 70.

⁴⁶ J. Barton Payne, "The Nature of Prediction," in *Encyclopedia of Biblical Prophecy: The Complete Guide to Scriptural Predictions and their Fulfillment* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1980), 21.

⁴⁷ Everett F. Harrison, "John," in *The Wycliffe Bible Commentary* (Chicago, IL: Moody, 1962), 1106.

untouched as to its historicity and future fulfillment of promises like those described in Isaiah 27. “If the NT explicitly rejects an OT institution, etc.,” points out John Feinberg, “it is canceled. But if God makes a point once (the OT), why must he repeat it in the NT for it still to be true and operative?”⁴⁸ There is nothing in Jesus’ vine analogy, if even it qualifies as a legitimate type, which hints that national Israel has been canceled, fulfilled, or any other concept suggesting its termination.

Furthermore, neither Jesus nor the church acts as a replacement or fulfillment of national Israel at John 15:1, 5. If a type-antitype correspondence does exist at John 15, it exists only to highlight a distinct, yet personal relationship between Jesus, Israel, and the (future) church. Acknowledging that biblical types do exist, Vlach concludes, “National Israel is not a type that is superseded by the church.... Instead, the typological connection is that of a historical and theological correspondence that reveals a close relationship between Israel and the church.”⁴⁹ The nation of Israel was never designed as a type to be transcended by Christ. Rather, Israel was always in need of the ultimate Israelite—Jesus the true Vine—to restore it (Isa 49:3–6). Indeed, their identity and function will continue into the future kingdom (Luke 2:8–20; Rev 20:6; 21:24).

Dispensational Implications of John 15:1, 5 in Relation to other NT Texts

The argument advanced throughout this article is that Jesus’ final ἐγώ εἰμι declaration at John 15 underscores a new era dawning in which the Holy Spirit would accomplish what national Israel never could. A transitioning of economies is announced with Jesus’ words, anticipating a dispensational shift in world history. By Jesus identifying the disciples as

⁴⁸ John S. Feinberg, “Theological Systems and the Testaments: Systems of Discontinuity,” in *Continuity and Discontinuity: Perspectives on the Relationship Between the Old and New Testaments: Essays in Honor of S. Lewis Johnson, Jr.*, ed. John S. Feinberg (Westchester, IL: Crossway, 1988), 76.

⁴⁹ Michael J. Vlach, *Dispensationalism: Essential Beliefs and Common Myths* (Los Angeles: Theological Studies, 2008), 22, 23.

“branches,” he disclosed a sharp distinction between himself as Israel, and them as related yet still distinct. According to Isaiah 27:2–6, national Israel has a hopeful future as God’s restored “pleasant vineyard,” and the vine analogy at John 15 serves to ratify that the promises concerning Israel are still binding, and that a new dispensation was about to come to fruition with the birth of the church. Such a proposition has admittedly never gained attention in traditional Johannine studies. However, in what follows, several NT texts will be shown to bear a striking semblance to Jesus’ true vine illustration, along with insights that help gain a better understanding of his intent at John 15:1, 5.

Acts 1:6–7

It is safely inferred that distinct identities and roles are being highlighted in John 15:1, 5, more so than the discipleship-abiding focus throughout the rest of the chapter—a feature of which virtually all commentators focus.⁵⁰ In particular, Jesus’ inclusion of his Father in verse 1 bears significant weight concerning dispensational thought—especially as it relates to Acts 1:6–7. This is because the Father’s role as ὁ γεωργός (the vinedresser), or better “the sovereign Cultivator,” is essential in understanding Jesus’ announcement of a dispensational shift. That the Father’s contribution in the mission of Jesus is prominent in the fourth gospel is readily seen by the fact that he is described as the “sender” of Jesus more than 50 times—an activity intended to elicit faith in Christ. John F. O’Grady observes, “Throughout the Gospel of John it is the peculiar function of the Father to bring people to faith.”⁵¹ As the sovereign Cultivator, it is the Father

⁵⁰ Francis Moloney represents the majority of Johannine commentators when he stated, “The outstanding feature of the opening section of 15:1–16:3 is the use of the verb *menein* “abide.” It is fundamental to the metaphor of the vine and the branches (vv.1 – 18) and is present in various forms across vv.1–11” (*Gospel of John*, 417). While the command to abide is certainly important to the chapter, one must still deal with the unique identities Jesus assigns in verses 1 and 5 in the beginning of the pericope.

⁵¹ John F. O’Grady, “The Good Shepherd and the Vine and the Branches,” 38, no. 2 (May 1978): 88.

who determines the epochs of world history and draws all things to his Son, the true Vine.

John's gospel is inimitable in its presentation of the Father as the absolute Sovereign who controls all events. Commenting on John 15:1, Moloney underscores the Father's sovereign role: "It is the Father who is ultimately responsible for all that Jesus does and makes known."⁵² Likewise, Haenchen adds: "Neither does Jesus claim anything as his own achievement, as he is represented in the Fourth Gospel ... but placed himself entirely in the service of the Father and renounces his own word. He gave himself over entirely to what the Father has affected in him."⁵³ The Father as sovereign over the Son's earthly missions (both advents) is key for understanding Jesus' death and resurrection (Acts 2:23–24) and his establishment of the kingdom to Israel (Acts 1:6–7).

After the risen Christ spent "forty days speaking about the Kingdom of God" to his disciples (Acts 1:4), they asked only one question: "Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?" (Acts 1:6). The disciples' question is telling. The verb used, ἀποκαθίστημι (restore), is best defined, "to change to an earlier good state or condition, *restore, reestablish*."⁵⁴ This verb is used in the synoptics to refer to a physical restoration of good health after being healed by Christ (Matt 12:18; Mark 8:25; Luke 22:51), as well as the future coming of Elijah and the restoration of everything (Matt 17:11). Because this verb denotes a change to an earlier good-state, there is no question that the disciples were expecting a complete re-establishment of national Israel. The biblical expectation of the kingdom was always future and literal. Stanley Toussaint writes, "When John the Baptist, the Lord Jesus, and the disciples announced the nearness of the kingdom of heaven/God (Matt 3:2; 4:17; 10:7), the audiences

⁵² Moloney, *Gospel of John*, 419.

⁵³ Haenchen, *John* 2, 131.

⁵⁴ BDAG, 927. Moreover, Liddell Henry George and Robert Scott, *Liddell and Scott's Greek-English Lexicon* abridged version (Norfolk, VA: BibleWorks, 2011), 5418 adds, "reinstate," to the list of glosses for ἀποκαθίστημι, which helps enforce the idea of a re-established, reinstated kingdom to Israel.

were thinking of an earthly kingdom of David. Never does the Lord teach anything different from their expectations.”⁵⁵

Equally fascinating is Jesus’ response: “It is not for you to know times or seasons that the Father has fixed by his own authority” (Acts 1:7). It is especially here that a connection to John 15:1 becomes apparent. At John 15, Jesus identifies the Father as ὁ γεωργός, the sovereign cultivator, demonstrating his absolute power and knowledge over all things pertaining to Jesus’ ministry. The Father’s sovereign role in Jesus’ vine analogy is germane to Jesus’ explanation at Acts 1:7 because the Father, being the cultivator of the vine, serves as a vivid word-picture of Him later establishing the kingdom in restored national Israel in fulfillment of OT prophecy (Isa 27:1–6; Dan 7:13–14; Amos 9:11–15).

In Acts 1:7, Jesus does not rebuke nor correct the disciples’ question. He does not offer anything in response that would lend a spiritual interpretation of the still future kingdom.⁵⁶ According to Toussaint, “In Acts 1:6 the disciples asked about the restoration of the kingdom to Israel. Again, Christ did not say they had a wrong view of the kingdom. Christ Himself looked ahead to a time when the disciples would be reigning with Him over Israel (Matt 19:28).”⁵⁷ The only thing Jesus offers in response is to say it is the Father who determines when Israel will be restored to her former glory.⁵⁸ As pointed out by Vlach, “The

⁵⁵ Stanley D. Toussaint, “God’s Plan for History: From the Ascension to the Second Coming of Christ,” in *Dispensationalism and the History of Redemption: A Developing and Diverse Tradition*, ed. D. Jeffrey Bingham and Glenn R. Kreider (Chicago: Moody, 2015), 179.

⁵⁶ Contrary to those who deny the concept of a restored national Israel and re-interpret texts such as Acts 1:7 in a spiritual sense. E.g., N. T. Wright, *New Testament and the People of God*, 374; and O. Palmer Robertson, *The Israel of God: Yesterday, Today, and Tomorrow* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2000), 134.

⁵⁷ Toussaint, “God’s Plan for History,” 179.

⁵⁸ John B. Polhill connects this to the prophet Joel: “Such passages as Joel 2:28–32 were interpreted in nationalistic terms that saw a general outpouring of the Spirit on Israel as a mark of the final great messianic Day of the Lord when Israel would be ‘restored’ to the former glory of the days

question of the apostles concerned the *timing* of the kingdom This is a ‘when’ question, not a ‘what’ question. The apostles are not asking Jesus to define the kingdom or explain its nature. They want to know *when* it was coming.”⁵⁹

Before Jesus’ death, the disciples were commissioned to preach about the kingdom exclusively to Israel (Matt 10:5–6). Now they spent 40 more days learning about it (Acts 1:3). The only thing they lacked was knowledge concerning the timing of its establishment. “There is no indication in Jesus’ reply,” concludes Bock, “that anything they asked was wrong except that they are excessively concerned about when all would take place.”⁶⁰ When Jesus answered that only the Father knows the time when literal Israel will be restored, it was a guarantee that “[he] will plant them on their land, and they shall never again be uprooted out of the land that [he had] given them” (Amos 9:15).

Therefore, no replacement, fulfillment, or dismissal of the old vine exists. Rather, a contrast between the two *vines* is what Jesus is underscoring, while highlighting the Father as the great cultivator, a point observed by Darby: “The true Vine, therefore, is not Israel; quite the contrary, it is Christ in contrast with Israel, but Christ planted on earth, taking Israel’s place, as the *true* Vine. The Father cultivates this plant, evidently on the earth.”⁶¹ The heavenly gardener plants, plans, and brings about promises given to his people, and does so through the true vine. National Israel is not fulfilled or absorbed into the vine at John 15:1; rather, the Father has a future restoration for the nation that is guaranteed to come to fruition (Isa 27:1–6; 49:3–6).

Matthew 21:33–44

John 15:1, 5 uses vine imagery similar to that of other NT Gospel texts such as Matthew 21. A common consensus among

of David and Solomon”(Acts, NAC 26, ed. David S. Dockery [Nashville: B & H, 1982], 84).

⁵⁹ Michael J. Vlach, *He Will Reign Forever: A Biblical Theology of the Kingdom of God* (Silverton, OR: Lampion, 2017), 402.

⁶⁰ Darrell L. Bock, Acts, BECNT ed. Robert W. Yarbrough and Robert H. Stein (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2017), 62.

⁶¹ John Nelson Darby, *Synopsis of the Books of the Bible: Matthew–John*, vol. 3 (London, UK: Cooper and Budd, 1949), 374.

NT scholars is that these vine/vineyard texts depict the church as having replaced Israel.⁶² Upon closer inspection, however, this conclusion is without convincing exegetical warrant. Each of these vine texts support the argument that national Israel is not replaced or transcended, and that a glorious restoration awaits her.

Matthew's Gospel presents a parable concerning a master of a vineyard (ἀμπελών) and a group of wicked tenants to which it was leased (Matt 21:33–44).⁶³ Much similarity exists between this parable and the "true vine" analogy in John 15.⁶⁴ In addition to *vineyard* language throughout the parable, a master/owner and his son are showcased within the story, both of whom have obvious connotations to Jesus and the Father. According to the parable, the owner of the vineyard sends two groups of servants to collect the vineyard's fruit, which ended violently both times. The landowner then finally sends his beloved son and heir thinking, "They will respect my son" (Matt 21:37). However, "they took him and threw him out of the vineyard and killed him" (v. 39).

The allusions of this ἀμπελών story to that of the vineyard depicted in Isaiah 5 are difficult to miss as both *watchtower* or *fence* (מִגְדָּל; πύργος) and *wine* or *winepress* (רֶכֶּץ; ληνός) connect the two linguistically, while national Israel connects them contextually. Recognizing this connection, John Nolland observes, "The link with Is. 5:2 immediately confirms that God

⁶² E.g., William Hendriksen, *Matthew*, New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1973), 786; Craig L. Blomberg, *Matthew*, NAC 22, ed. David S. Dockery (Nashville, TN: B&H, 1992), 325; Rudolf Schnackenburg, *The Gospel of Matthew*, trans. Robert R. Barr (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 212.

⁶³ For the biblical equivalence of ἄμπελος (vine) and ἀμπελών (vineyard), see David M. Ball, "'I Am'" in John's Gospel," 244–46; and Allen C. Meyers, ed., "Vine, Vineyard," in *Eerdmans Bible Dictionary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 1038.

⁶⁴ The fact that Jesus clearly informs his audience that the story in Matthew is a "parable" (Matt 21:33) enforces the argument made throughout that his vine analogy at John 15 is not to be understood parabolically or allegorically since no indication is given to take it as such.

is to be identified as the landowner. It also makes virtually certain that the vineyard is to be identified with the Jewish people, established as a people by the efforts of God himself.”⁶⁵ Matthew’s parable demonstrates that it is God who plants and cultivates his people Israel, who constantly fail. John 15:1, 5 furthers the story by contrasting Christ with Israel as the faithful and true vine.

The parable in Matthew 21 ends with Jesus’ declaring that Israel’s leadership had rejected their cornerstone (v. 42), so the kingdom would be given to a new generation (v. 43). From this declaration, it is illegitimate to infer that Israel has been replaced by any candidate, particularly the church. “It must not be concluded from this,” warns Toussaint, “that the kingdom is removed forever from Israel. This is impossible due to the promises given to Abraham and David. The promises are addressed to Israel as a nation.”⁶⁶

Additionally, NT texts such as Romans 11:26–27 and Acts 1:6 speak of Israel’s future salvation and restoration. Thus, Gundry is mistaken to think that “Matthew writes his Gospel for the church as the new chosen nation, which at least for the time being has replaced the old chosen nation of Israel.”⁶⁷ Israel’s future as God’s pleasant vineyard (Isa 27) will bring further blessings to the world (Rom 11:12, 15).

Matthew’s vineyard parable is also similar to John 15 in meaning. Jesus, contrasting himself to the faithless vine, does not disclose a replacement of Israel by the church any more than his parable in Matthew 21 suggests the church as the new kingdom. David Turner observes, “According to [Matt] 21:45, the Jewish leaders realize that Jesus is talking about them, not Israel as a whole. It is thus a mistake to view 21:43 as indicating the

⁶⁵ John Nolland, *The Gospel of Matthew*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 869–70.

⁶⁶ Stanley D. Toussaint, *Behold the King: A Study of Matthew* (Portland, OR: Multnomah, 1980), 252.

⁶⁷ Robert H. Gundry, *A Survey of the New Testament* 4th ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), 162.

replacement of Israel by the gentile church.”⁶⁸ Instead, the New Testament declares that Israel will play a crucial role during the tribulation (Rev 7:4–8) and will enjoy a position of leadership and service after Christ’s return (Isa 2:2–4; Matt 19:28). These facts highlight dispensational distinctions necessary to prophetic fulfillment. This further enforces the contention of the current paper, that Jesus’ final “I Am” statement is intended to underscore a transitioning of economies—from one of law to one of grace.

Luke 13:6–9, 34–35

In Luke’s gospel, Jesus tells another parable regarding a barren fig tree in a vineyard. Linguistically, the terms connecting this story to that of Jesus’ declaration at John 15:1, 5 are “vineyard” (ἀμπελῶν) and “vinedresser” (ἀμπελουργός) in vv.6–7. While both Greek terms Luke uses differ slightly from those of John (e.g., John uses γεωργός [land-worker] instead of ἀμπελουργός [vinedresser]), their meaning is contextually similar. However, a notable difference is seen in the terms’ referents. In Luke, an unnamed “man” marked by the indefinite pronoun τις is representative of God while the “vinedresser” appears to be representative of Christ. Further, the “fig tree” (συκῆ) most probably stands for national Israel which Luke uses in place of the Johannine term ἄμπελος (vine, John 15:1, 5).⁶⁹ Bock explains,

The fig tree is a picture of the nation and is a variation of another common figure that pictures the nation as a vine or as caring for a vine.... The fig tree pictures the nation and portrays Israel as not

⁶⁸ David L. Turner, *Matthew*, BECNT (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008), 517.

⁶⁹ I. Howard Marshall differs in that Marshall does not see the fig tree representing Israel: “In the parable its fruit is symbolical of the Jewish people, but the OT references ... hardly suggests that [the fig tree as] a standing symbol for Israel is being used” (The Gospel of Luke, NIGTC [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans], 555). Marshall is of the minority opinion here among Johannine scholars.

having borne any spiritual produce for some time. The owner's disgust pictures God's evaluation of Israel's current status. It is possible that the vinedresser represents the merciful element in God's character pleading for patience.⁷⁰

As with the Matthean parable, scholars also see a connection between the parable in Luke with the judgment passage in Isaiah 5. For example, Joel Green asks, "Does the narrator hope that his audience will hear Isa 5:1–7 in the background of this parable? If so, an identification of Israel with the vineyard is likely, with further identification of the fig tree as Israel's barren leadership also conceivable."⁷¹ Yet, in no sense is a replacement given for Israel; rather, the opposite is conveyed as the parable ends with future hope for the fig tree (vv. 8–9).

The hope conveyed to national Israel in the Lukan vineyard parable runs congruent to the hope for the nation conveyed in the Matthean parable—both finding a connecting point with Jesus' final ἐγώ εἶμι declaration in John 15:1, 5. Jesus, in contrast to the unfaithful vine, is the genuine or ultimate vine—the ever-faithful and true Israelite. It is the true vine—Jesus—to whom repentant Israel will one day cry, as recorded at the end of the chapter (Luke 13:35). Understanding this as a future reality, Bock asserts, "[Jesus and the church] believed that God would restore the nation in the end. In fact, the NT suggests that such a response will precede Christ's return, thus Luke's later reference to the current period as 'the time of the Gentiles (Luke 21:24; see also Rom 11:11–32 ... and probably Rev 7:1–8).'"⁷² The Lukan parable and prophecy suggests no type of replacement for national Israel. Vlach states, "This declaration of blessedness will come from a repentant nation at the time of its restoration.... There is judgment for the present generation of Israel, but there is also the hope of restoration in the future."⁷³ Indeed, the

⁷⁰ Darrel L. Bock, *Luke 9:51–24:53*, BECNT (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996), 1209.

⁷¹ Joel B. Green, *The Gospel of Luke*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 515n126.

⁷² Bock, *Luke 9:51–24:53*, 1251.

⁷³ Vlach, *Has the Church Replaced Israel?*, 186–187.

repentant nation as a whole will finally receive her Messiah at his next coming—a grammatical point Luke makes by his use of the second person plural pronoun ὑμῖν (you all), and second person plural verb ἴδητέ (you all see) (cf. Zech 12:10).

Summation of Dispensational Implications

Far from baseless, the dispensational implications from these passages are rich. It should be recalled that in John 15:5, Jesus declares Himself as the vine and the disciples as τὰ κλήματα (the branches). At the time Jesus uttered this statement, the eleven disciples were His immediate audience. It is they who would be the leaders of the approaching economy, one which the Holy Spirit would usher in with the birth of the church. As Smith points out, “The Jewish branch is primarily meant; as by the contrasted fruit-bearing branch we are to understand primarily the Apostles, the Christian church having its germ in them.”⁷⁴

Therefore, it is crucial to emphasize that Jesus declared *Himself* to be the vine—the faithful Israel—while His disciples (the germinal church) are attached as the branches. In other words, the church is not the vine; it does not take the place of national Israel. This is in contrast to Bruce Waltke, who declares that the New Testament teaches the “hard fact that national Israel and its law have been permanently replaced by the church.... The Jewish *nation* no longer has a place as the special people of God; that place has been taken by the Christian community which fulfills God’s purpose for Israel.”⁷⁵ It is also conflicts with Brent Parker: “Through Jesus Christ, the Savior of Israel and the nations, the eschatological, renewed Israel has emerged—the church.”⁷⁶ Contrary to these, however, Craig Blasing is on point: “[The church] [is] a new reality that did not replace, cancel, or ‘spiritually’ fulfill the plan and purpose of God for Israel.”⁷⁷ As

⁷⁴ Smith, “Unfruitful Branches in John 15,” 12.

⁷⁵ Waltke, “Kingdom Promises as Spiritual,” 274–75.

⁷⁶ Parker, “Israel-Christ-Church Relationship,” 63.

⁷⁷ Craig A. Blasing, “God’s Plan for History: The Consummation,” in *Dispensationalism and the History of Redemption: A Developing and Diverse Tradition*, ed. D. Jeffrey Bingham and Glenn R. Kreider (Chicago: Moody), 198.

such, the church is not the new Israel, but is comprised of a remnant of believing Israelites during the current economy.⁷⁸

This dispensation, or economy, will continue until the restoration of national Israel after Jesus' second coming (cf., Zech 14:4–9; Matt 24:30–31; Rom 11:25–27). Summing up this future hope, Blaising concludes, "Dispensational views of the eschatological consummation must be understood as attempts to give full theological justification to the hopes of Israel and the hopes of the church as distinctively, progressively, and historically revealed and affirmed in Scripture."⁷⁹

In sum, while the New Testament contains other passages depicting Gentile/Jewish relations through horticulture imagery, the passages in Matthew and Luke were chosen due to their specific vine/vineyard language shared with John 15:1, 5.⁸⁰ As

⁷⁸ Contra C. Marvin Pate, who says: "The church, according to the New Testament, is the eschatological (end-time) Israel incorporated in Jesus Christ, and as such, is a progression beyond historical Israel" ("The Relationship between Israel and the Church," in *The Baker Illustrated Bible Handbook*, ed. Daniel Hays and J. Scott Duvall [Grand Rapids: Baker, 2011], 759). Awkwardly, Pate then goes on to provides a caveat that the church does not permanently replace Israel. This writer sees it difficult to bypass the logical conclusion that if the church has become the "eschatological Israel" that progresses past national Israel then, at least in some respect, national/historical Israel has been replaced—even permanently (as what would follow the eschaton?).

⁷⁹ Blaising, "God's Plan for History," 198.

⁸⁰ One notable exclusion from this section is Paul's olive tree analogy in Romans 11:16–24. For solid treatments of this passage which view the "root" as referring to either Abraham or all three of the Jewish patriarchs, see Douglas J. Moo, *The Epistle of to the Romans*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 703–04; Thomas S. Schreiner, *Romans*, BECNT (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998), 603–09; Alva J. McClain, *Romans: The Gospel of God's Grace* (Winona Lake, IN: BMH, 1973), 201–202; John Phillips, *Exploring Romans: An Expository Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1969), 171–72; Further, David Olander, "God's Sovereign Choice of Israel: The Holy Root of Romans 11:16–17," *The Journal of Dispensational Theology* 19, no. 58 (winter 2015): 253–70, sees the root as extending from Abraham through Isaac and Jacob and into the eternal covenants made with them. For a different take that understands Paul's "root" analogy as a rich description of the "oneness" between Israelite and Gentile remnants, see

demonstrated, none of these passages suggests any replacement or transcendence of national Israel. As Toussaint notes, “The New Testament sees three groups of people—Jews, Gentiles, and Christ’s believers, that is, the church (cf. 1 Cor 10:32).”⁸¹ These distinctions are upheld through each of the passages, with no mixing with the others.

Relation to Inaugurated Eschatology

Welsh scholar C. H. Dodd (1884–1973) popularized the idea of an eschatology in John’s gospel which is *realized* in Jesus and through his church.⁸² According to Dodd, there is to be no still-future kingdom expected.⁸³ Dodd rejected a literal view of historical events such as creation and the fall, which led to his rejection of historical end-time events. To Dodd, all events were “realized” in Christ.⁸⁴ This idea was later modified by French Lutheran scholar Oscar Cullman (1902–1999) and promoted in American biblical scholarship through George Eldon Ladd (1911–1982).⁸⁵ Following Cullman’s lead in Europe, Ladd created a hybrid between Dodd’s extreme view that saw all eschatology fulfilled in Christ’s first advent, and one that saw

Richard N. Longenecker, *The Epistle to the Romans*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2016), 889–90.

⁸¹ Toussaint, “God’s Plan for History,” 176.

⁸² See C. H. Dodd, *History and the Gospels* (London, UK: James Nisbet, 1938); and C. H. Dodd, *Apostolic Preaching and Its Developments: Three Lectures with an Appendix on Eschatology and History* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1982).

⁸³ Bultmann held to a similar theory seeing all eschatological elements wrapped up in Jesus, the word who became flesh (John 1:14), and something to demythologize into a presently-experienced existential crisis. See Rudolf Bultmann, *The Gospel of John*, 625; cf. Rudolf Bultmann, *Theology of the New Testament*, trans. Kendrick Grobel (New York: Scribner’s, 1970), 1:4–11, 19–22; 2:39–40, 113–14.

⁸⁴ John F. Walvoord, “Realized Eschatology,” *BSac* 127, no. 508 (October 1970): 316.

⁸⁵ Two pivotal works detailing “inaugurated eschatology” penned by Cullman and Ladd are Oscar Cullman, *Salvation in History* (New York: Harper & Row, 1967); and George E. Ladd, *The Gospel of the Kingdom* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1959).

nothing eschatologically related fulfilled.⁸⁶ He termed this middle path “inaugurated eschatology,” positing an “already/not yet” form of the kingdom of God. According to Ladd, “The Kingdom is not only an eschatological gift belonging to the Age to Come; it is also a gift to be received in the old aeon.”⁸⁷ For Ladd, “God *is* now the king, but he must also *become* the king.”⁸⁸

Ladd’s paradigm would eventually influence a form of dispensationalists who call themselves *progressive*, adopting his *already/not yet* theory as a hermeneutical device, especially for the gospel of John.⁸⁹ In contrast to Dodd and Ladd, this thesis rejects any idea that the kingdom of God is currently experienced. Rather than positing an *already/not yet* fulfillment of the *Davidic Kingdom*, John’s gospel emphasizes eternal life as something experienced in this age, as well as the age to come (John 3:16; 5:24; 17:3; et al.). Thus, it is in relation to *soteriology* that any “realized eschatology” can be found in John’s gospel.⁹⁰ Any further inaugurated eschatology found in John may be traced

⁸⁶ The extreme futurist eschatological view was held by men such as Anglican clergyman and ultra-dispensationalist, E. W. Bullinger (1837–1913).

⁸⁷ George E. Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament*, rev ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 70.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 58.

⁸⁹ For an outstanding critique of Progressive Dispensationalism to include their Laddian-hermeneutics see, Ron J. Bigalke Jr. ed., *Progressive Dispensationalism: An Analysis of the Movement and Defense of Traditional Dispensationalism* (Lanham, MD: University P, 2005).

⁹⁰ This seems to be Schreiner’s view as well, yet he obfuscates it by equating personal salvation with the already/not yet inauguration of the Kingdom of God: “The kingdom can be explained in terms of already-not yet. The *kingdom was inaugurated* in Jesus’ ministry but not yet consumed We noted a number of texts that indicate that the *inauguration of eternal life* in the ministry of Jesus does not rule out a future consummation” (Thomas R. Schreiner, *New Testament Theology: Magnifying God in Christ* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008], 95; emphasis added. Cf. Thomas Schreiner *Paul, Apostle of God’s Glory in Christ: A Pauline Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2006), 20, where he likewise neglects an important distinction between individual salvation and national Israelite promises in his “already but not yet” discussion.

to Jesus' ἐγὼ εἶμι at John 15:1, 5 which appears to *inaugurate* a new economy furthering world history toward end-time events. Anything more than these two aspects regarding inaugurated eschatology is pushing beyond the intention of John.

As Acts 7:56 and Revelation 3:21 make clear, Jesus is currently in heaven at the right hand of the Father, sitting on the Father's throne—not the throne of David (see Rev 12:5). If there is any current kingship rule of Christ, it is to be tied to Melchizedekian kingship, in which Christ reigns as a royal priest, not his future Davidic kingship.⁹¹

Yet, since Dodd's and Ladd's theory, Johannine scholarship is almost dominated by realized or inaugurated eschatology. But if Jesus' true vine analogy means he has replaced national Israel, then there is no future kingdom to be expected since he is now reigning on David's throne (2 Sam 7). If such a theory were legitimate, then the kingdom of God is a reality currently experienced. However, a future kingdom, one in which the church will share, still awaits fruition in a redeemed national Israel (Amos 9:11–15; cf. Acts 1:6–7; Rev 20:2–7). Fruchtenbaum states, "Jesus has never yet sat on the Throne of David ruling over a Kingdom of Israel. The reestablishment of the Davidic Throne and Messiah's rule over the Kingdom still awaits a future fulfillment. It requires a future kingdom."⁹²

What was inaugurated by Jesus with His "I Am" statements (John 15:1, 5) was a transitioning of economies, a movement from God ruling the world through the Mosaic code to one in

⁹¹ For an excellent treatment on the current Melchizedekian ministry of Jesus connected to the theme of "inaugurated eschatology," see Kyle C. Dunham, "The Kingdom of Christ and of God: A Traditional Dispensationalist Argument for Inaugurated Eschatology," (Th.M. thesis, Detroit Baptist Theological Seminary, 2006), Theological Research Exchange Network. See also Andrew M. Woods, *The Coming Kingdom: What is the Kingdom and How is Kingdom Now Theology Changing the Focus of the Church?* (Duluth, MN: GGP, 2016), 98–100, for a brief but solid treatment of Christ's present priesthood.

⁹² Arnold G. Fruchtenbaum, *The Footsteps of the Messiah: A Study of the Prophetic Events* (Tustin, CA: Ariel Ministries, 2003), 377. Later, Fruchtenbaum details how exactly church saints share in the future Messianic kingdom (387–96).

which grace would be the new ruling factor (cf. Rom 6:14). As such, it is a dispensational shift that is previewed by Jesus' ἐγὼ εἰμι declaration, not any fulfillment of the kingdom of God. Other than this, any such *inaugurated eschatology* found in John's gospel is germane only to individual salvation, not the future Davidic Kingdom (Isa 2:1–5; 27:2–6, 12–13).⁹³

Jesus will rule from literal Jerusalem—the capital of the world-wide kingdom of God. Vlach observes, “While the kingdom is mediated through the nation Israel, it is not only for Israel. The kingdom is open to all who believe.”⁹⁴ Gentile inclusion in the future kingdom was something always anticipated by the OT (Isa 25:6; cf., 19:24–25). Jesus also affirmed such a diverse inclusion of the future kingdom (Matt 8:11; cf. Rev 7:9–10). Andrew Woods sums it up by stating: “All that God intended for the earthly theocracy of the Old Testament era will come to fruition not only for Israel, but also for the entire world.”⁹⁵

Jesus' final “I Am” statement in John is intended to highlight distinct identities and roles. Jesus is victorious where Israel had failed. God is in sovereign control over all of Jesus' ministry to include His future kingdom rule. Woods states, “God the Father will govern the last Adam, or God the Son, who in turn will govern the world on the Father's behalf.”⁹⁶ Further, the Jewish disciples as branches are to remain as much in Christ as they by nature do in national Israel. They formed the nucleus of the church and as such were to abide in Christ while upholding their Israelite heritage. There is no replacement of the Jewish nation or inauguration of kingdom eschatology. Rather, as Kostenberger states, in the current interim, “Jesus displaces Israel as the *focus*

⁹³ This view of restricting “inaugurated eschatology” to personal soteriology was one advocated by Robert Mutlow, “The Predicated ‘I Am’ Sayings in the Gospel of John,” (M.A. thesis, The Catholic Theological Union at Chicago, 1995).

⁹⁴ Vlach, *He Will Reign Forever*, 315.

⁹⁵ Woods, *Coming Kingdom*, 174.

⁹⁶ Ibid.

of God's plan of salvation [emphasis added]."⁹⁷ A displacing of focus is not the same as replacement.

The Germinal Church and the Coming Spirit

It is recalled that Jesus' final "I Am" statement is in the middle of his discourse to his disciples, which ends with his betrayal (John 13–17). Broken down further, Jesus' true-vine analogy is centered directly in between his prophetic *inclusio* of the coming Holy Spirit (John 14, 16). Again, Jesus' only audience during this section of Scripture is the 11 disciples.⁹⁸ These disciples formed the kernel of the Christian church, which the Holy Spirit would birth at the Day of Pentecost (Acts 2). Jesus chose as the predicate for his "I Am" statement a metaphor borrowed from the OT depicting corporate Israel, ἄμπελος (vine).⁹⁹

A new community called the church was on the horizon, which would derive its life from the vine. As Köstenberger observes, "Now Jesus is the vine whose branches constitute the new Messianic community."¹⁰⁰ The age of law was about to expire with the "true Vine," and a new age was about to begin

⁹⁷ Andreas J. Köstenberger, *John*, BECNT (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2004), 448.

⁹⁸ Judas had by this time left the group and was plotting Jesus' betrayal with Jewish authorities (John 12:26–30).

⁹⁹ For a recent treatment emphasizing the complex "intertextuality" of both the Old and New Testaments demonstrating that the writers of Scripture were biblical exegetes (dealing with a text's meaning) as well as astute biblical theologians (dealing with a text's significance), see Abner Chou, *The Hermeneutics of the Biblical Writers: Learning to Interpret Scripture from the Prophets and Apostles* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2018). Chou convincingly demonstrates that when a prophet or apostle uses previous biblical language by either directly quoting from or alluding to other biblical passages, there are usually far more than two texts at play. Indeed, the entire Bible seems to be an intricate linguistic web of connecting points. As such, Jesus' use of "vine" in John 15 should call to mind the various OT, and possibly NT, uses of vine and vineyard, taking each usage or allusion into account.

¹⁰⁰ Andreas J. Köstenberger, "The Challenge of a Systematized Biblical Theology of Mission: Missiological Insights from the Gospel of John," *Missiology* 23, no. 4 (October 1995): 451.

with the Holy Spirit's indwelling ministry (John 14:25–26; 16:7–15). In other words, Jesus was announcing a dispensational shift from law to grace.

Also advanced throughout the article was the promotion of a still-future and glorious restoration of national Israel. The kingdom of God prophesied throughout the OT will come to fruition upon Christ's return to literal Israel (Zech 14). Jesus' final ἔγω εἶμι, then, was not a statement of replacement of Israel in any sense. In fact, the Bible's last book ensures the continuance of ethnic Israel, so much so that it lists each individual tribe for the monumental roles they play during the coming tribulation (Rev 7:3–8; cf. Jer 16:16–19; Ezek 9:4–6). Commenting on these 144,000 ethnic Jews marked out during this time, Robert Thomas is adamant:

The term *Israel* must be referred to the physical descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. This is the natural understanding of the word's normal usage in the NT as well as the OT. This accounts for the detailed division of the people of God into twelve families answering individually to the twelve tribes of Israel in vv.5–8 and is the explanation favored by the earliest Christian tradition.¹⁰¹

Jesus' statement in John 15, that he is the true vine or the genuine Israel, cannot be taken as an expiration of literal Israel. Rather, Jesus was telling his disciples that a new era was about to begin that may change relationships (Jew and Gentile, believers and God), but not distinct identities. Smith agrees, "This relationship was soon to assume a new form in that He was leaving, but the Holy Spirit would come as His Representative. With the arrival of the Holy Spirit there was to begin a new and vital relationship."¹⁰²

National Israel continues and will ultimately be redeemed at Christ's second coming (Zech 12:10; 14:4–11; cf. Ezek 34:25–31). In the interim, Jewish and Gentile believers are bonded

¹⁰¹ Robert L. Thomas, *Revelation 1–7: An Exegetical Commentary* (Chicago: Moody, 1992), 476–77.

¹⁰² Charles R. Smith, "The Unfruitful Branches in John 15," *Grace Journal* 9 (Spring 1968): 4.

together by the Holy Spirit who baptizes them into the tangible expression of the current dispensation—the church (1 Cor 12:13). “John affirms that the Jews have not ceased to be God’s covenant people,” confirms Köstenberger, “specifically, individual believing Jews are incorporated into Jesus’ new Messianic community.”¹⁰³ Those who believe Jesus and His church have fulfilled, absorbed, or replaced national Israel err in assuming there cannot be two peoples of God.¹⁰⁴ Yet, individual identities are not eliminated and transcended by the church or kingdom but are preserved and redeemed. The Holy Spirit’s ministry in the current economy has torn down any wall of hostility between Jew and Gentile believers but has not eliminated their distinctiveness. Capturing vital distinctions between the law and grace economies, mid-19th-century theologian R. W. Dale explained:

That the Jewish race might not lose, through their sins, the inheritance bestowed on them in Abraham, God gave them the law; that we may not lose, through our sins, the inheritance bestowed on us in Christ, God has given us the Spirit. They were not to obtain the right to their peculiar distinctions by obeying the law; the law was intended to prevent them losing what was theirs without their disobedience: we are not to obtain the right to the Christian dispensation by the work of the Spirit; the Spirit has been given that the redemption, which is God’s free gift to us through Christ, may not be lost.¹⁰⁵

When Christ announced that he was the true Israel, and (what would be) the church were the branches, the disciples were to understand his words in light of his promises of his earthly departure and the coming of the Spirit (John 14:1–20). Jesus

¹⁰³ Köstenberger, “Challenge of a Systematized Biblical Theology of Mission,” 456.

¹⁰⁴ See Bruce A. Baker, “The Two Peoples of God in 2 Thessalonians 1:10,” *Journal of Dispensational Theology* 13, no. 38 (April 2009): 5–40. Indeed, nothing biblically precludes the probability of *multiple* peoples of God, such as believers in pre-Mosaic and post-Church economies. Cf. Isaiah 19:25.

¹⁰⁵ R. W. Dale, *The Jewish Temple and the Christian Church* (New York: Hodder and Stoughton, n.d.), 168.

would return for his church one day before establishing the kingdom in Israel, as only the ultimate Israelite—the true vine—could restore the Israelite nation. Alva McClain contends, “On the basis of Christ’s finished work, the Spirit’s ministry becomes possible, not only in the age of Christ’s absence, but also during His bodily presence in the coming age of the Kingdom.”¹⁰⁶ Therefore, with Jesus’ words in John 15, a future for national Israel is upheld while a preview is given that Gentiles were to be included in the Spirit’s work alongside ethnic Jews.

Conclusion

While many scholars choose to focus on the more climatic-sounding “I Am” statements that emphasize individual salvation, Jesus’ final self-predicated ἐγώ εἰμι in John 15—with its national Israelite undertones—has suffered from a lack sufficient treatment by scholars. This article seeking to fill that gap has demonstrated several things in support of one main proposition: at John 15:1, 5, Jesus contrasts himself with national Israel, while His disciples are identified as distinct but related entities who should expect a shift in economies with the coming of the Holy Spirit. While Jesus’ vine imagery at John 15 may have had in mind OT judgment texts concerning Israel, its backdrop more probably concerned positive OT vine texts which stress national Israel’s glorious future, Isaiah 27:1–6 being the prime example.

Christ’s declaration as being the true vine is not a “fulfillment” of vine prophecies nor is it to be carelessly viewed as typology language. Rather, Jesus used a metaphor depicting national Israel for comparison sake in an illustrative fashion, omitting any need for allegorical or cryptic interpretation. Understood with a heightened view to the text’s grammar and history, implications customary to dispensational thought emerge as each character in Jesus’ illustration enjoys an intimate relationship, while remaining permanently distinct entries. Further, Jesus’ delivered is true vine analogy between his

¹⁰⁶ Alva J. McClain, *The Greatness of the Kingdom: An Inductive Study of the Kingdom of God* (Winona Lake, IN: BMH, 2007), 376.

prophecies of the Holy Spirit's coming, contextually highlighting a preview of the coming economy to be initiated, yet without collapsing biblical promises of a glorious future for Israel. Therefore, what was inaugurated by Jesus with his "I Am" statement at John 15:1, 5 was a transitioning of economies, a movement from God's ruling the world through the Mosaic code to one in which grace would be the new ruling factor. As such, Jewish and Gentile believers are now bound together by the Holy Spirit who baptizes them into the tangible expression of the current economy—the church (1 Cor 12:13)—while the kingdom of God still awaits its future establishment in national Israel.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁷ The author acknowledges Mr. Paul Scharf and Mr. Chris Miller for lending their keen eyes and editing skills early-on in the preparation of this article.

Toward a Dispensational Missiology: Eschatological Parameters for the Global Task

Chris Burnett

Charles Taber, important trainer of Bible translators and avid mission theorist, faithfully advanced anthropological and linguistic strategies on the use of Scripture in the global church. Yet a few troublingly dismissive phrases seem to summarize his experiences of years of contextualizing the Bible in West Africa: “We had found out in the field... that the national church was capable of being guided by the Holy Spirit using the Scriptures. We also found it no longer possible to trust the dispensational hermeneutic that I had learned from childhood.”² Taber seems to suggest that the more he was exposed to a West African method of interacting with Scripture, the more he grew to distrust the literal, historical, grammatical interpretive method.

Anti-colonial rhetoric that decries white late-modern-era theology and its bibliological commitments is not uncommon in contemporary evangelical literature.³ Some mission theorists

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² Charles R. Taber, *International Bulletin Of Missionary Research*, vol. 29, No. 2 (April 2005): 89.

³ Postmodern scholars criticize the evangelical propositionalism and apparent cultural ignorance of some modern era missionaries as a deleterious, top-down theological elitism which arose during the Enlightenment. See Reformed theologian Douglas Wilson’s claim that propositionalism is an evangelical “pathology” (In Douglas Wilson, “A Couple Doctrinal Pathologies,” *Blog & Mablog: Theology that Bites Back* October 19, 2008, accessed August 21, 2018, <https://dougwils.com/s16-theology/a-couple-doctrinal-pathologies.html>). The largely postmodern claim that classical propositionalists followed Enlightenment philosophies are not uncommon in contextualization theory arising from Westerners and

who influence overseas practitioners today present unchallenged presuppositions on the role of Scripture, and in so doing seem to radically diminish the centrality of Scripture in engaging cultures.⁴ But trivializing the advancements of the dispensational hermeneutic in forming global theology is a poorly presented argument.

For example, it hardly seems plausible that such an influential linguist and missionary as Taber would come to disregard a hermeneutic known for its faithful search for the original meaning of Scripture, especially when compared to the theological landscape of Africa, known for promoting a culture-first reading.⁵ Equally strange is Taber's suggestion that any

non-Westerners alike. See Alister McGrath, *A Passion for Truth: The Intellectual Coherence of Evangelicalism* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1996), 163–79, with discussion through p. 200; Stanley J. Grenz and John R. Franke, *Beyond Foundationalism—Shaping Theology in a Postmodern Context* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2001), 13–14; John R. Franke, “Reforming Theology: Toward A Postmodern Reformed Dogmatics,” *WTJ* 65, no. 1 (Spring 2003): 1–26; F. LeRon Shults, *The Postfoundationalist Task of Theology: Wolfhart Pannenberg and the New Theological Rationality* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999). Also see strong discussion by Nigerian Victor I. Ezigbo, *Re-Imagining African Christologies: Conversing with the Interpretations and Appropriations of Jesus Christ in African Christianity* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2010), 1, 8–13, esp. 10–12.

⁴ Missions authors Michael Frost and Alan Hirsch, for example, urge for socio-cultural accommodation practices above propositionally-driven ones. They promote various insider movement strategies that seem neither to deliver the content of the gospel in a culturally relevant way nor match conservative parameters for evangelistic engagement. By highlighting what appear to be unnecessary pragmatic concerns, they risk advocating for activities which obscure the biblical mandate to preach the truths of Scripture at all times (2 Tim 4:1–2) with utmost priority (1 Cor 9:16). See Michael Frost and Alan Hirsch, *Shaping of Things to Come: Innovation and Mission for the 21st Century Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2013), 109, 117–21.

⁵ Nigerian theologian David Tuesday Adamo summarizes the many interpretive directions under the central tenet of cultural priority: “African biblical hermeneutics is vital to the wellbeing of African society. African biblical hermeneutics is a methodological resource that makes African social

local church, in West Africa or elsewhere, can ensure a Spirit-led interpretation of the Bible without a commitment to both rigorously understand the authorial intent of a passage and to find the appropriate local application in keeping with a consistently literal reading of Scripture.

What additional benefits might Charles Taber have offered if he had upheld the dispensational hermeneutic in all areas of the missionary task? How would promoting a consistently literal approach to the text in the global church bring theological clarity to evangelism and discipleship? Could the application of the dispensational hermeneutic in national churches steer the tide of unbiblical culture-based theology?⁶

cultural contexts the subject of interpretation.” He further defines the way in which the Afrocentric hermeneutic is to be deemed biblical: “This is a methodology that reappraises ancient biblical tradition and African world-views, cultures and life experiences, with the purpose of correcting the effect of the cultural, ideological conditioning to which Africa and Africans have been subjected in the business of biblical interpretation. It is the rereading of the Christian scripture from a premeditatedly Africentric [sic] perspective.... The analysis of the biblical text is done from the perspective of an African world-view and culture” (David Tuesday Adamo, “What is African Biblical Hermeneutics?,” *Black Theology: An International Journal* 13, no. 1 [April 2015]: 70).

⁶ The late David Hesselgrave, influential missiologist and co-founder of the Evangelical Missiological Society (EMS), was an exemplary voice of conservative reason. He spoke over a decade ago against the generic “evangelical ecumenism” of EMS members which has led to the propagation of sub-biblical theories across the world. From Hesselgrave’s vantage point, the varying and conflicting theological positions of the members have overhauled the once sure conservative bibliography which members pledged to uphold at the time of joining the Society. The fact that Hesselgrave would plead with so-called conservative evangelicals for the integrity, intent, and priority of Scripture evidences how prolific sub-biblical contextualization strategies have become across the globe. EMS requires adherence to the ICBI Chicago Statement on Inerrancy at the time of entrance but does not define a policy to ensure the application of inerrancy to the practical theology espoused by its members (accessed August 21, 2018, https://library.dts.edu/Pages/TL/Special/ICBI_1.pdf). See David J. Hesselgrave, “The Power of Words,” published in *Global Missiology* (January 2006), accessed February 16, 2016, www.globalmissiology.net;

This article presents a decidedly dispensational direction for global instruction in order to highlight some of the advantages to the theological training of the global church that result from the dispensational hermeneutic.⁷ A “dispensational missiology” is constructed via two biblical doctrines: the expectation of the imminent return of Jesus Christ and a future for national Israel. The dispensational trajectory for missions ensures that essential principles of evangelism and sanctification are not overlooked when raising up indigenous disciples—living and serving with a heightened awareness of the future, in keeping with the pastoral teaching of the apostles.

For discussion are key NT texts that help the missionary and the national church to keep a clear focus on the biblical mission ethic and the vital parameters for evangelism. The passages are Matthew 24–25, 1 Corinthians 15, Titus 2, 1 Thessalonians 1 and 4–5, 2 Thessalonians 1–2, and 2 Peter 3. These passages reveal how Israel, the church, and future events should factor into the attitude and practice of missions today both for missionaries and for their local Timothies.

also see Richard V. Pierard, “Evangelicalism,” in *New Twentieth Century Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge*, ed. J. D. Douglas (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1991), 311–13.

⁷ Given the limitations of the paper and the audience’s familiarity with dispensationalism, the paper will focus on the theological implications of the literal, historical, grammatical hermeneutic rather than reconstruct its exegetical process. A concise definition of the dispensational hermeneutic is however an essential starting point. Robert Thomas adapted Milton Terry’s definition of the “grammatico-historical method” of exegesis as applied to the Bible: “A study of inspired Scripture designed to discover under the guidance of the Holy Spirit the meaning of a text dictated by the principles of grammar and the facts of history.” See Robert Thomas, *Introduction to Exegesis* (Los Angeles: Robert L. Thomas, 1987), 24.

Nathan Holsteen adds a succinct yet summative definition to include a “(more) consistent literalism,” as he calls it: “A literal hermeneutic is an approach to Scripture that finds the meaning of the text in the plain or normal sense of the text in its context.” For the term and quotation, see Nathan D. Holsteen, “The Hermeneutic of Dispensationalism,” in *Dispensationalism and the History of Redemption: A Developing and Diverse Tradition*, ed. D. Jeffrey Bingham and Glenn R. Kreider (Chicago: Moody, 2015), 112–13.

Dispensational Distinctions and Their Missiological Import

Constructing a dispensational missiology hinges upon one's commitment not only to the literal, historical, grammatical hermeneutic, but also to the doctrine of perspicuity, namely that Scripture communicates God's message to its audience with verbal clarity.⁸ Because of the clarity of Scripture, it is possible to read Scripture with a consistent literalism⁹ with the aim of conserving the authorial intent of a given prophecy in order to understand it in light of redemptive history.

One helpful way to work toward the missiological import of dispensationalism is to syllogistically represent the theological axioms that derive from the hermeneutical distinctives. At least

⁸ Brad Klassen ably defends the doctrine of perspicuity, and offers a useful definition: "Simply stated, to affirm the clarity or perspicuity of verbal revelation means to affirm that when God speaks, he does so in such a way that his words will be clear and intelligible to his intended audience God communicates his intent effectively, employing the most appropriate forms and structures of human language to make the knowledge he desires to reveal comprehensible to mankind. He never misses the mark." See Bradley D. Klassen, "A Light Shining in a Dark Place: The Clarity of Verbal Revelation According to Moses and the Prophets" (PhD Dissertation, The Master's Seminary, 2016), 1.

⁹ Holsteen, "Hermeneutic of Dispensationalism," 112. In his chapter, Holsteen carefully parses through various uses of the dispensational claim to literalism. He helpfully notes how, in the early years of progressive dispensationalism, Blaising might have exaggerated the emphases between dispensationalists, as literalism "is still a common feature in all forms of dispensationalism" (120–21n27). For essential discussion on what constitutes literal vs. non-literal hermeneutics with regard to the apostolic treatments of types, see John S. Feinberg, "Systems of Discontinuity," *Continuity and Discontinuity: Perspectives on the Relationship Between the Old and New Testaments*, ed. John S. Feinberg (Westchester, IL: Crossway, 1988), 74–75. For a lengthy yet unsatisfactory discussion which fails to recognize or respond to the key hermeneutical debate raised by Feinberg, see Peter J. Gentry and Stephen J. Wellum, *Kingdom through Covenant: A Biblical-Theological Understanding of the Covenants* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), 109–126, esp. 113, 117–18.

seven dispensational axioms can be traced, as is done here with some preliminary comments.¹⁰

1. God clearly reveals his will through the Scriptures, the written “oracles of God.”

The inspired written form of the “oracles of God” (Acts 7:38; Rom 3:2; Heb 5:12; cf. 2 Tim 3:16) is the direct revelation of God. The prophets were fully aware of the message they proclaimed¹¹ and their role in proclaiming it.¹²

¹⁰ The syllogism presupposes that the dispensational hermeneutic supports its findings even though the exegetical steps involved in the hermeneutical process are not detailed here. Given the practical theological interests of this paper, only some treatments and sources will be used in supporting the syllogism.

¹¹ It is important to distinguish between “objective” and “subjective” clarity, along the lines of Luther’s “external” and “internal” *claritas*. Klassen raises the distinction and defines the objective clarity, stating, “A fundamental distinction exists between two perspectives on the clarity of verbal revelation: the nature of verbal revelation as it is defined by God and intended for man, and the manner in which man receives it. Strictly speaking, the clarity of verbal revelation as a quality of God’s word refers to the former, not the latter To acknowledge that verbal revelation is objectively clear is not to contend that it must *appear as clear* to its readers” (Klassen, “Light Shining in a Dark Place,” 2n4; emphasis in original). Klassen defines the “subjective” clarity similarly to Luther’s “internal” *obscuritas*: “A responsible, comprehensive definition of the doctrine of clarity must certainly include reference to the obfuscating effect of sin, the necessity of spiritual regeneration, the Holy Spirit’s ministry of illumination in believers, and the role of the community of God’s people in the interpretive process” (Klassen, “Light Shining in a Dark Place,” 2n3). For discussion of Luther’s dual *claritas* in relation to his dual *obscuritas*, see Bernhard Lohse, *Martin Luther’s Theology: Its Historical and Systematic Development* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1999), 164–65.

¹² Klassen details the prophet’s self-recognition as “God’s human mouth,” acting as “covenant prosecutors” in full recognition of their task and message. See Klassen, “Light Shining in a Dark Place,” 281–91.

2. The eschatological details taught God's faithfulness and demanded faithful response.

For example, Genesis 15:6 is an early indicator that faith in God is the belief in God's faithfulness to accomplish his future plan—the righteous person is the one who trusts that God will fulfill at a time yet to be revealed what he has promised by oath.¹³ Predictive prophecy is useful for understanding God's eschatological trajectory and for living presently in God's will.¹⁴ Both the present-day ethical dimension and the predictive eschatological dimension worked in tandem to deliver a timely message to the original hearers.¹⁵

¹³ Well stated in *ibid.*, 297.

¹⁴ To the contrary, Brent Sandy finds little support that the OT prophets could predict the distant future with enough detail to bring the kind of gravitas to their original hearers that present-day readers assume. He argues that the literary style employed by the prophets makes predictive prophecy “inherently ambiguous and in some ways less precise.” See D. Brent Sandy, *Plowshares & Pruning Hooks: Rethinking the Language of Biblical Prophecy and Apocalyptic* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2002), 158. In Klassen's terms, Sandy understands OT prophecy to be more “kaleidoscopic” than “telescopic,” and his observations appear to strike against the conservative understanding of perspicuity. See Klassen, “Light Shining in a Dark Place,” 295n47, 303.

¹⁵ This concept is explained by Mike Stallard, who helpfully pushes back against Sandy's conclusion that the metaphorical and at times emotional language of the prophets is shrouded in a layer of obfuscation and mystery which might sacrifice eschatological detail (Mike Stallard, “The Certainty of Prophetic Language,” Pre-Trib Research Center, accessed August 27, 2018, <https://www.pre-trib.org/articles/dr-mike-stallard/message/the-certainty-of-prophetic-language/read>). Klassen also responds to Sandy, writing, “By stressing so ardently the limited value of distant-future, non-Messianic prophecy, [Sandy and others] have diluted the value which distant-future, Messianic prophecies had for their original audiences.... It is much more capable of effecting moral transformation in the present than they acknowledge” (Klassen, “Light Shining in a Dark Place,” 299).

3. Jesus and the apostles literally connected their prophecies to OT eschatology.

The dispensational hermeneutic expects prophetic harmony between the Testaments because all of Scripture is one storyline.¹⁶ There is “a united rationale amongst the biblical authors” as to the hermeneutic to employ and the eschatological content to maintain across Testaments.¹⁷ Contemporary readers are to follow this rationale.¹⁸

¹⁶ Dispensationalist Michael Vlach adds hermeneutical precision on Scripture’s trajectory: “The Bible’s storyline as revealed in the Old Testament is the same storyline that is fulfilled in the New Testament over the course of Jesus’ two comings. The New Testament does not reinterpret or transcend the Bible’s storyline” (Michael J. Vlach, *Dispensationalism: Essential Beliefs and Common Myths* [Los Angeles: Theological Studies P, 2016], 57–58).

¹⁷ Abner Chou makes a strong case for the interconnectedness and intertextuality of OT and NT prophets. As one example of eschatological alignment, Jesus, the ultimate prophet (Heb 1:1–2), sources his teaching on the timing of the abomination of desolation (Matt 24:15–16) in Daniel’s chronology in Dan 9:27. Other OT prophecies interwoven in Jesus’ Olivet Discourse include Isaiah 27:13; Daniel 7:9–13; 12:1; Zechariah 9:14. See Abner Chou, *The Hermeneutics of the Biblical Writers: Learning to Interpret Scripture from the Prophets and Apostles* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Academic, 2018), 159. In another example, Peter explicitly links the predictions of his letter to those of the OT prophets, Jesus, and his apostles (3 Pet 3:2). Throughout 2 Peter 3:1–18, Peter bases his description of the eschatological day of the Lord and the new heavens and earth on allusions and quotations from Isaiah 13:6; 65:17; and Malachi 4:5. What’s more, in 3:10, Peter echoes the “thief in the night” image from Jesus (Matt 24:43) as well as Paul (1 Thess 5:2). See Abner Chou, *The Hermeneutics of the Biblical Writers*, 188.

¹⁸ Considering each prophecy in its specific context in the canon requires what Chou has coined “prophetic, apostolic, and Christian hermeneutics.” The prophets wrote with a view to the future, and the NT writers understood their task of exegeting and expounding OT teaching for the NT context. Chou remarks, “Literal-grammatical-historical hermeneutics is not a modern formulation but how the biblical writers read the Scriptures. The Christian hermeneutic follows the prophets and apostles,

4. Consistent literalism preserves the reader from distorting the trajectory of the prophecy.

Non-literal results do not flow from literal hermeneutical methods; the obfuscating of the eschatological details ultimately changes the nature of the original message.¹⁹ When a passage is allowed to speak for itself at its particular point in the progress of revelation, then the prophecy is seen for what it really is: a promise that must be completely fulfilled.²⁰

5. The promises to Israel must be fulfilled in distinction from the church.

and is thereby a hermeneutic of obedience.” See Chou, *Hermeneutics of the Biblical Writers*, 22–23, with quotation on 23.

¹⁹ Any system which contends for a NT reinterpretation of prior prophecy, rather than expansion thereof, does not employ a literal hermeneutic even though it may propose to do so. Progressive Covenantalists Gentry and Wellum see dispensationalists and nondispensationalists as employing the same hermeneutic (in Gentry and Wellum, *Kingdom through Covenant*, 113), even though nondispensational systems tend to expect the redefinition of OT predictive prophecy in the NT. Blaising and Bock rightly ask of the nondispensational claim to a “literal” hermeneutic: “If language says one thing in terms of intention but really means something else, then is this not still a type of allegory?” See Blaising and Bock, *Dispensationalism, Israel and the Church* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), 393. On the basis of such observations, Bock surmises that nondispensational eschatology is ultimately unhelpful in the quest to understand the work of the church today: “Confusion about the identity of the kingdom, its subjects, and its nature leads to confusion about the church’s mission and mandate” (Darrell L. Bock, in Blaising and Bock, *Dispensationalism, Israel and the Church*, 66).

²⁰ So Beecher: “From the time when [a promise] was first given it was doubtless thought of as something by which future ages would be able to test God’s ability to reveal coming events.... In this aspect of it, it would stir their imaginations, and set them to looking forward” (Willis Judson Beecher, *The Prophets and the Promise* [New York: Thomas Y. Crowell & Company, 1905], 212–13).

Concerning the aspect of future salvation, for example, OT prophecy concerning both Jew and Gentile must “be taken on its own terms rather than reinterpreted in the light of the NT.”²¹ There are many unique features with regard to future Israel that point to the coming reality that Israel will serve as the vehicle for the global, physical, and spiritual blessing of all peoples of the earth.²²

6. The missionary activity of the apostles was motivated by prophecy.

The NT prophets understood that the events which culminate in national Israel’s salvation would follow the return of Messiah. NT missionary activity was directed to both Jew and Gentile in keeping with the direction of prophecy.²³

²¹ Feinberg, “Systems of Discontinuity,” 75. A consistently literal reading of the “new man” of Ephesians 2:11–16 cannot deny the diversity of Israel within the Christian unity of Jew and Greek. Carl Hoch notes the discontinuity inherent to the concept of “newness,” while conserving continuity in God’s plan of salvation to save Gentiles and establish the church. See Carl B. Hoch, “The New Man of Ephesians 2,” in Blaising and Bock, *Dispensationalism, Israel and the Church*, 98–126. Neither can a literal hermeneutic deny the perpetuity of Israel’s blessing in the physical land simply because salvation has now extended to the nations and folded Gentiles into the blessing promised to the “seed” of Abraham (Gen 12:1–3; Rom 4:11–12). See Paul Feinberg’s logic on the concept of multiple fulfillment in Paul D. Feinberg, “Hermeneutics of Discontinuity,” in *Continuity and Discontinuity*, 109–28, esp. 127.

²² Scripture itself expects that the nation of Israel will one day receive physical land as an inheritance by God (Gen 12:1–3), and that one day “all Israel” will live to the glory of Messiah (Rom 11:26). Jesus Christ will one day rule all the nations from the land of Israel in an intermediate state for 1,000 years (Rev 20:1–6) before the eternal state begins (1 Cor 15:24–28).

²³ Transcending OT prophecy would cause the NT writers to diminish Israel’s distinct future so that they would have given singular eschatological significance to the church. The meaning and significance of OT passages in their original contexts at their stage of revelation would have become

7. Predictive prophecy ought to motivate and guide missionary activity in the church today.

The reliability in God's character hinges upon the expectation of absolute and total fulfillment for both Jew and Gentile.²⁴ Missionaries must operate in the hope of a future restoration of environment, society, economy, and politics in the millennial reign of Christ.²⁵

distorted, and the apostolic teaching and mission would have been inappropriately weighted in a largely non-Jewish trajectory.

It is instructive to highlight the importance the apostles gave to seeing Israel saved in accordance with prophecy. In a quick scan of Acts 17–18, Paul employed a distinct Jew-first missionary strategy (cf. Rom 1:16). He made it a matter of course to enter a city and begin witnessing about the Christ in the synagogue on the Sabbath. In the Thessalonian synagogue Paul and his missionary companions engaged in discussion about Jesus Christ on three consecutive Sabbaths (17:1–2). In Berea they immediately did the same (17:10). Beyond Macedonia, in Athens, before arriving in the Areopagus, he witnessed to Jews and Greek God-fearers in the synagogue, but also to a general pagan audience in the marketplace, which was the center of social life and local commerce (cf. 16:19; 17:5). In Corinth, after finding the Jews Aquila and Priscilla, his main interactions were in the synagogue on the Sabbath (18:4), though doubtless he used his leather-working trade as an opportunity to testify of Christ to all peoples in the interim (18:3, 5). Paul's missionary efforts in Corinth appear to have been specific to the teaching of the Word of God in the synagogue, though increasing Jewish hostility shifted Paul's focus toward the Greek proselytes (18:4–11).

²⁴ Since God made unbreakable, unconditional promises, He must sustain them along the timeline of salvation history, “for the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable” (Rom 11:29; unless otherwise specified, all verse selections are taken from *New American Standard Bible: 1995 Update*. La Habra, CA: The Lockman Foundation, 1995). The believer believes that God spoke of the future truthfully in the past, and expects that what was specifically declared will be completely fulfilled in the future.

²⁵ Because Jesus provided a sneak preview of his future reign in his first coming, the missionary is free to serve him today with the understanding that only under his physical rule in the future will true justice and peace be accomplished in the nations. However, understanding Israel's future role or part in the grand narrative of salvation history is both varied and vague in missiology. Evangelical missiologists commonly describe the grand

Select New Testament Eschatological Highlights

Dispensationalism wagers that Scripture is clear about how Israel, the church, and future events should factor into everyday ecclesiology. But dispensationalism goes further, to direct the attitude and practice of missions. Missiological implications can be derived from several NT passages, including Matthew 24–25; 1 Corinthians 15; Titus 2; 1 Thessalonians 1, 4, and 5; 2 Thessalonians 1–2; and 2 Peter 3. The passages teach national believers to expect the imminent return of Christ and to conduct themselves in godly ways, just as the original audience was commanded, in the interim.

Matthew 24–25

In this longest record of the Olivet Discourse (cf. Mark 13:1–37; Luke 21:5–36), Jesus did not reveal a clear timeframe for the “end of the age” (cf. Matt 24:3) Rather, he decried speculative efforts to determine the timing of his immediate return, showing them through parables the impossibility of discovering such information.²⁶

narrative of Scripture in biblically appropriate terms, namely that God is faithful to save sinners according to the Abrahamic covenant. Yet, there appears to be no consensus view on the degree to which Israel actually mediates the Abrahamic covenant. For equivocation on the role of future Israel, see Andreas J. Köstenberger and Peter T. O’Brien, ed. *Salvation to the Ends of the Earth: A Biblical Theology of Mission* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2001), 262–63.

²⁶ Cf. 24:36, 42, 44, 50; 25:13; Mark 13:32. The signs Jesus did provide pointed to his appearance at the end of the coming “day of the Lord” but the timeframe of the beginning of His eschatological return remained shrouded in mystery. So John F. Hart, “Jesus and the Rapture: Matthew 24,” in *Evidence for the Rapture*, ed. John F. Hart (Chicago: Moody, 2015), 52. So John MacArthur Jr., *Parables: The Mysteries of God's Kingdom Revealed Through the Stories Jesus Told* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2015), 125–26; also Craig Blaising, “A Case for the Pretribulation Rapture,” in *Three Views on the Rapture: Pretribulation, Prewrath, or Posttribulation*, ed. Alan Hultberg (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010), 50–51.

Jesus taught on imminency²⁷ to urge believers to remain faithful regardless of what may appear to be end time events. The fruit of expectancy, that patient anticipation of the Lord's imminent return, is an all-encompassing tension in the life of the Christian.²⁸ To this end, believers were to be alert at all times, watching for his return (Mark 13:33–37), and ministering boldly until he comes (cf. Rev 3:2; 1 Cor 16:13; 1 Thess 5:6; 1 Pet 5:8). In 24:45–51 Jesus called his disciples to holy living and the priority of servanthood.²⁹ In 25:1–13, He demanded urgent

²⁷ Thomas uses the term to describe the sudden return of Jesus Christ without warning or sign (see Robert L. Thomas, "The Rapture and the Biblical Teaching of Imminency," in *Evidence for the Rapture*, 23–24, 31.

²⁸ So it was in the life of the apostle Paul, who hoped to remain in the flesh until the appearance of Christ (cf. Rom 13:11; 1 Cor 10:11; Phil 4:5) yet eventually recognized his physical end might precede Christ's return (2 Tim 4:6–8). See brief treatment on Paul's expectancy in Thomas, *Evidence for the Rapture*, 31.

²⁹ In the parable of the two servants in 24:45–51, the timing of the return of the Master is unknown and surprising. Both the faithful and the wicked servant believe in the imminent return of their Master, but the wicked servant compounds a lack of constraint with moral degradation in his absence. While the wicked servant does not doubt that his Master will one day return, he does not view the return as impending, and thus disregards the prerogatives of his stewardship to his own peril. He is an example of the one who is not ready for the Son of Man to return (24:44). The parable of the two servants points to the accountability required of every servant of Christ: where the knowledge of the Lord's return does not foster an eager expectation which results in a work ethic commensurate to the truth, sin may abound and a fearful judgment will result (cf. Mark 8:38).

expectation for His return in all godliness,³⁰ and in 25:14–30 He taught on the importance of responsible labor for the Kingdom.³¹

In light of the prophetic content and exhortations, the missionary must reinforce the expectancy of Christ's sudden return with local disciples: serve the Master with all diligence and haste until the *parousia*. The national believer, just like every believer, must be characterized by moral living, eager preparedness to be with him in glory, and faithfulness in ministry. As Jesus taught, failure to appreciate the imminence of Christ's return opens the door to folly and peril.

³⁰ In the following parable of the ten bridesmaids (25:1–13), Jesus addresses his imminent return from the human standpoint of a delayed arrival. An excessive interval of time before Christ returns might be as surprising to a hopeful believer as an unsuspecting return would be to an unfaithful servant, as is the case in the previous parable. Expectations may need to be extended and care must be given so that hope does not wane while waiting for the Bridegroom. As throughout the Olivet Discourse, the question is not whether Christ will return, for Christ's return is presumed to occur imminently. The question is whether the believer will live with a sense of urgency which spurs faithful conduct and witness since His return could be at any time (cf. Rom 13:11; 1 Cor 7:29; 1 Pet 4:7). Long or short in human years, the time of the *parousia* will come unexpectedly like a thief (cf. 1 Thess 5:2; 2 Pet 3:10; Rev 3:3; Matt 24:40–44 [Luke 12:39]). Failure to be ready for him is a foolishness tantamount to the wickedness of the immoral servant of the previous parable, for the negative result is permanent.

³¹ The parable of the talents in Matthew 25:14–30 underscores the work ethic demanded of the believer until the return of Christ. To be given of the Master's resources is to be given an opportunity to invest it wisely in order for it to produce dividends (v. 27). Not putting the Master's resource to use is considered a wicked action by a lazy and worthless person (vv. 26, 30). Such wastefulness in the absence of the Master leads to ruin when he returns at an unexpected time. Jesus again highlights through this parable the folly of being unprepared for his imminent return. The Lord, however, is pleased by the diligent work of his faithful servants, and so he shares his joy with those who deliver a return on their stewardship to the degree of faithfulness commensurate with the resources given to them (vv. 15, 21, 23, 29). The Apostle Paul later emphasized the importance of understanding and meeting one's responsibility before Christ: "Let a man regard us in this manner, as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God. In this case, moreover, it is required of stewards that one be found trustworthy" (1 Cor 4:1–2).

1 Corinthians 15

Paul delineates the doctrine of bodily resurrection and rapture in order to offer a transcendent hope which will buttress the church in the face of false teaching.³² In the increasingly secular 21st-century world, Paul's message resonates strongly, especially to those who suffer opposition to the gospel: living faithfully before a faithless world is in part shaped by a biblical view of the future, for "if we have hoped in Christ in this life only, we are of all men most to be pitied" (v. 19).

The illogical claim that believers would not be raised from the dead (v. 12) is countered by the reality that Jesus Christ was raised as the "first fruit" of all who die in the faith (vv. 13–23, esp. 20, 23). Were there no resurrected Christ, there would be no redemption in Christ, nor would there be resurrection or rapture in him. And if, in the end, death held authority over the believer rather than Christ, then there would be no motivation to serve Him during times of suffering (vv. 30–32).³³

If the missionary teaches the national believers to expect the rapture and the bodily resurrection with the imminent return of Christ, then he will have been faithful to the work and will stand confidently before Christ in the day of glorification and reward

³² First Corinthians 15 describes the rapture as a fact for all believers (vv. 51–52). No time reference is supplied, but the fact that believers will receive glorified bodies in that instant (cf. Phil 3:20–21) distinguishes this event from the final event of His coming (cf. Rev 19:14). So Paul N. Benware, *Understanding End Times Prophecy: A Comprehensive Approach* (Chicago: Moody, 2006), 213. Mayhue succinctly analyzes the major contrasts between the rapture event and the second coming of Christ to earth on linguistic and contextual grounds. See Richard Mayhue, "Why a Pretribulation Rapture?," in *Christ's Prophetic Plans: A Futuristic Premillennial Primer*, ed. John MacArthur and Richard Mayhue (Chicago: Moody, 2012), 93–94.

³³ The passage bookends the eschaton by instructing that after Christ has subjected all powers and authorities, including death, then his millennial reign will conclude and the eternal state will commence (vv. 24–26). If neither Christ nor his followers resurrected, no one would be caught up in the clouds nor have a glorified body incapable of corruption. Death could not be defeated and the thought of an eternal reign in an eternal kingdom in the presence of the eternal Son would be ludicrous.

(Phil 2:16; cf. 1:6; 1 Cor 3:10–15; 4:5; 2 Cor 5:9–10). Eschatologically informed believers will live above the evils of this world and will be more ready to proclaim the gospel to their people. The stronger their convictions about the truth the more confident their ministry to their people—eschatological hope is a key motivator being a light in this crooked and perverse generation (Phil 2:15).

Conversely, the missionary who denies the global church the rich exhortations that arise from eschatology is guilty of theological ignorance both for himself and for those he serves. Considering eschatology to be a minor topic to be sidelined, or even an advanced topic kept at bay from young believers, leaves the believer exposed to worldliness and uninspired to set his focus on heaven (vv. 33–34).³⁴ What's more, beyond implicitly hindering one from living heaven-bound, the national church will not be sufficiently motivated to defend the truth of God that Paul affirms. Quelling the kinds of eschatological heresies which plague the church, as was the case in Corinth, becomes all the more difficult to the theologically dull and undiscerning.

Titus 2

Paul's message to his missionary delegate Titus in the overseas context of Crete outlines the godly behavior required of both the missionary and the indigenous believer, and does so on exegetical grounds.³⁵ The missionary must authoritatively

³⁴ Matthew Henry preaches it well: "If there will be a resurrection and a future life, we should live and act as those who believe it, and should not give into such senseless and sottish notions as will debauch our morals, and render us loose and sensual in our lives" (Matthew Henry, *Matthew Henry's Commentary on the Whole Bible: Complete and Unabridged in One Volume* [Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994], 2275).

³⁵ Paul instructs Titus to proclaim that salvation will advance from the spiritual to the material realm at a future time in which Jesus Christ appears in his glory. Only at his second advent will spiritual redemption be brought to fulfillment, and so the believer's hope is also his eschatological tension in which he is spiritually redeemed, yet with further redemption coming at an unknown future time. While little here is delineated about the nature of Christ's coming revelation, it will be physical, as connoted by ἐπιφάνω. See Titus 3:4, and the use of ἐπιφάνω in the physically fulfilled prophecy

proclaim how saving grace powerfully intervened in the world at Jesus Christ's first coming (v. 11) and now provides spiritual redemption and purification to all who will believe in him today (v. 12). But the proclamation of the gospel (cf. v. 15) is not complete unless it points to the final redemption promised at Christ's future physical appearance. The hope that Christ will soon be revealed in his unfading glory provides the motivation for boldness in proclaiming the gospel now (v. 15; cf. 2 Cor 3:10–12).

Additionally, it is that longing for the realization of the future hope, that expectancy, which fuels the church to live in righteousness presently (cf. Titus 2:12). The renunciation of sin, the practice of righteousness, and eager service today are zealously lived out under the looming shadow of Christ's appearing (v. 14).

Therefore, keeping a focus on the “blessed hope” strengthens the missionary's resolve to instruct nationals on the importance of godly conduct now. The expectancy of Christ's imminent physical return is the context whereby the faithful missionary must rebuke believers who are not living “self-controlled, upright, and godly lives in the present age” (v. 12).

1 Thessalonians 1, 4, 5

Eschatological teaching permeates the first letter to the Thessalonian church (cf. 1:10; 2:12; 2:19; 3:13). According to 1 Thessalonians 1:9–10, all believers are commanded to uphold the doctrines of the rapture,³⁶ bodily resurrection, and the physical

of Luke 1:79 (Burkhard Gärtner, “Επιφάνεια,” in *NIDNTT*, ed. Colin Brown [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1986], 319–20).

³⁶ A specifically pretribulational orientation creates a particularly urgent zeal for church planting. The only time in which the church may participate in reaching the lost is collocated within the “day of salvation” (cf. 2 Cor 6:2; cf. Rev 1:3; 6:1–8). The language of 1 Thessalonians 4:16–17 indicates that the rapture of the church will be pretribulational. The trumpet will sound with authority and urgency (v. 16). If it were otherwise, the Thessalonians would have raised pointed questions and fears about life in the tribulation. Tribulation would have been imminent rather than the coming of the Lord. The believers are to be both informed (v. 13) and comforted (v. 18) by the reality of an imminent rapture for themselves, and the resurrection of their

return of Christ. Paul's recap of the Thessalonian conversions provides a clear example of how evangelization and a precise eschatology pair together in a missionary context. The passage indicates that a successful gospel witness must lead to a successful discipleship in which eschatology is incorporated into the early theological instruction of new converts from an unchurched setting.

Missionaries ought to find Paul's model of evangelization and eschatological instruction among the Thessalonian believers useful. In the narrative the new converts received the gospel with full assurance (1:5) and renounced their idolatry, demonstrating sincere repentance by serving the true and living God (1:9). They continued to live out their Christian hope by eagerly awaiting the return of the resurrected Christ who saved them.³⁷ The

dead in Christ. The encouragement tied to this rapture teaching parallels the teaching in John 14:1–3 in which believers are promised a presence with Christ when he comes again to snatch his people on earth (John 14:3; 1 Thess 4:17). See Benware, *Understanding End Times Prophecy*, 211; Mayhue, "Why a Pretribulation Rapture?," 91–92.

Dispensationalist Paul Benware highlights how futuristic premillennialism raises at least three important results of the rapture which are gloriously hopeful for believers alive today. First, Christ's promise to retrieve his own will be fulfilled. His commitment to unbroken fellowship with His saints will be faithfully and finally realized. Second, the believer's salvation will be complete insofar as the rapture will release us from the bondage of sin by transforming the believer's flesh from mortal to immortal. This grand mystery (1 Cor 15:51) will be a final act of saving grace to those already saved by grace through faith in Christ. Third, the rapture will unite the dead in Christ and the living church so that the invisible body of Christ will be brought to fruition. The thought of complete unity in Christ in the air is an excellent comfort to all affected by the grief of death (1 Thess 4:18) (Benware, *Understanding End Times Prophecy*, 214).

³⁷ The Christian's future hope is grounded in the eschatological image of Christ. Jesus' physical return from heaven (cf. Acts 1:11) corroborates the biblical witness that, once slain, Jesus was resurrected to life and is active today in the presence of the Father as Melchizedekian High Priest (Heb 7:16, 23–28; cf. 2:10–15). When Christ returns at an unspecified time in the future, he will come as the loving Deliverer to save true Christians before he pours out his wrath as the Judge of the unrepentant.

missionary who girds the national believer with eschatology actually bolster's the believer's Christology—the believer now lives a life of expectancy, permeated by service to the Savior who will return.³⁸

Yet, emotional and intellectual challenges arise as a disciple grows in the knowledge of doctrine and love for God and others. The Thessalonian believers, who had been instructed on the return of Christ by Paul (2 Thess 2:5), raised troubling questions about those in the church who died or would die before the rapture (1 Thess 4:13). Apparently they needed follow-up from Paul, despite Timothy's efforts to root them in doctrine (cf. 3:2), in order to resolve tensions about the timing of the resurrection of the saints and their uncertainty about whether those they mourned would participate in the glorious return of Christ.³⁹ To

The term meaning "to await" or "expect" in 1 Thessalonians 1:10 ἀναμένω is *hapax legomenon* to the NT. If there is a question as to whether this waiting intends the quality of Christian hope often applied to γρηγορέω (cf. Matt 24:42; 25:13; 26:41; Mark 13:35, 37; 14:38; Acts 20:31; 1 Cor 16:13; 1 Thess 5:6; 1 Pet 5:8; Rev 3:2f; 16:15), the LXX may assist. In Jeremiah 16:13, LXX translates קָנָה ("to await" or "to hope") with ἀναμένω to capture the emotional search for illumination in a time of dark judgment. See "קָנָה," in Ludwig Koehler, Walter Baumgartner, M. E. J. Richardson, and Johann Jakob Stamm, *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Leiden: Brill, 1994–2000), 1082; "Ἀναμένω," in F. W. Danker, W. F. Arndt and F. W. Gingrich, eds. *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*. 3rd ed. Based on Walter Bauer's *Griechisch-deutsches Wörterbuch zu den Schriften des Neuen Testaments und der frühchristlichen Literatur*, 6th ed, eds. K. Aland and B. Aland, with V. Reichmann. (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2000), 68.

³⁸ So R. C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Paul's Epistles to the Colossians, to the Thessalonians, to Timothy, to Titus and to Philemon* (Columbus, OH: Lutheran Book Concern, 1937), 234–35. Lange suggests that they needed more time to work through the ramifications of the doctrine, in Lange, *1 & 2 Thessalonians*, trans. and ed. Philip Schaff (New York: Charles Scribner, 1869), 74–75.

³⁹ So Lenski, *Colossians, Thessalonians, Timothy, Titus, Philemon*, 323. For helpful discussion of the timing and participation view in light of problematic proposals, see Kevin D. Zuber, "Paul and the Rapture: 1 Thessalonians 4–5," in *Evidence for the Rapture*, 151–55.

this deeply emotional question Paul instructs on the future bodily resurrection.⁴⁰ The doctrine was Paul's remedy for grief, especially in the face of the hopelessness common to nonbelievers in the local culture (4:13). For the believer, death must not generate hopeless sorrow but rather an abiding hope because of the teaching on life after physical death. Death is an inherently eschatological topic, for death as sleep (cf. John 11:11) implies the promise of an awakening (1 Thess 4:16).

There are world events today that look horrifically "tribulational" from the vantage point of history. Persecuted global Christians might tend, like the Thessalonian believers, to wonder if their fiery trials constitute *parousia* events. To address such concerns about end time events, Paul opens 1 Thessalonians 5 on the new topic of the Day of the Lord.⁴¹ Instruction about the terrifying, wrathful event is meant as an encouragement to keep doing the important reciprocal work of edifying the saints—those experiencing a fearful anxiety about the future should encourage one another (5:11). The sincere faith of believers can only be strengthened when recognizing that the terrifying cataclysmic events are not for their destruction but for the wicked (v. 3). The thought that the dead in Christ will be resurrected when the living believers will be snatched away, all before the day of the Lord, is designed to be a great comfort to the church.

The prophetic content ought to not only replace angst but lead to clearheaded thought and action in the work of the ministry (5:6–8). Christ is even now sanctifying all who are identified with him now with faith, hope, and love, and his sanctifying work

⁴⁰ The dead in Christ will be raised at the second coming of the Lord, and that day will come as a surprise (cf. 5:2). The teaching parallels the resurrection teaching in 1 Corinthians 15. The Thessalonian believers understood that Jesus was to come back, just as the apostles were instructed by Jesus (John 14:1–3). Through a report by Timothy, Paul learned that they questioned whether the dead brethren would they also participate in the coming blessings and glories of Christ.

⁴¹ Περὶ δὲ ("Now as to," or "Now concerning") uses an accusative of reference to mark a shift in topic to what follows. See Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 379. For discussion on the use of the construction in 5:1, see Zuber, "Paul and the Rapture," 161.

will be made complete at the rapture or bodily resurrection of the dead in Christ. Furthermore, the fact that Christ's return will bring swift and severe punishment on unbelievers serves to motivate the church to evangelize the lost while time permits—the coming wrath necessitates urgent Christian witness.

The question is not whether Christ will fulfill his promise to rapture the church and raise dead church-age believers, but whether believers will pursue the completion of their sanctification with integrity and marked growth in holiness during their earthly years. Such an eschatologically aware believer will become a mature believer who is emotionally grounded and positioned well to counsel and lead others to live sanctified lives in the hope of the soon coming Christ. Blamelessness of spirit, soul, and body are not just ultimate goals but real desires that should tangibly mark every Christian. For a missionary to in some way neglect teaching this eschatological content to persecuted global Christians is, on a very real and practical level, unconscionable.

2 Thessalonians 1:1–2:12

The severity of the affliction suffered by the church caused the Thessalonians once again to fear they were living in the vengeful day of the Lord (1:4). Though they were maturing in faith and love since Paul's first letter (1:3), they apparently waned in eschatological hope due to their pressing difficulties. In Paul's second letter he addresses the believers' debilitating concern that they had somehow missed the gathering of the saints at rapture (2:1–2). Yet, as bad as the suffering may have been, there was still little correlation with the ultimate day of the Lord because specific events would need to take place before Christ would come to rule (2:3–4).⁴² Ultimate relief from suffering and persecution must wait for an unknown future time when Christ in his wrath metes out all due vengeance against the wicked (1:6–10; 2:8, 12).

⁴² Similarities between the persecution of the first century and that of the eschaton were felt insofar as the lawlessness of the wicked world system and false religions was already very much at work to torment believers and corrupt society (2:7; cf. 1 John 2:18; 3:4; 4:3).

Having a right view of the end to the wicked is necessary so that the suffering Christian might understand both the full extent of God's justice and the present call to personal righteousness. A correct eschatological framework is essential for reinforcing the believer's steadfast pursuit of a worthy walk full of deeds commensurate with true faith, all done to the glory of the Lord (1:11–12; cf. Phil 1:9–11). Once again, it is the missionary's task to adopt these doctrines, live in the light of them, and ensure that they are taught and applied to the very difficult circumstances in which the Global Church suffers.

It would be a mistake, however, to see theological instruction as a stale lecture devoid of pathos and relevance. Paul's letter indicates that the Thessalonian disciples believed the doctrine of the rapture. What they needed now was pastoral care so that they could live godly lives in light of the prophecies. Paul, in his wisdom, actually addressed their concerns with a more detailed doctrine of eschatology. The missionary would do well to utilize doctrine to instill a Christian hope, and to do so pastorally, especially as the global church faces increasing persecution.

2 Peter 3:1–18

Peter reminds his readers to be attentive to the eschatological teaching that they receive because the predictive prophecy he proclaims comes from the OT prophets, and also from Jesus and the other apostles (vv. 1–2). No Christian should disparage the doctrine of the return of Christ with some feigned “pan-millennialism,” which is no better than the position of the false teachers.⁴³ In fact, Peter does not record the prophecy lesson simply to fill out his readers' eschatology. Rather, he does so to help the maturing believers grow stronger in discernment and

⁴³ “Pan-millennialism” is the humorous position that “everything will ‘pan out’ in the end.” But denying the prophetic content is tantamount to following the example of the false teachers which have begun to rise up in the church who knowingly mocking the return of Christ as a lie (3:3–5; cf. 2:1–3). Rather, the believer is commanded to wait for Jesus' second coming with patience (3:8). After all, it is the patience of the Lord to await the fullness of salvation (v. 15), no matter how long that may seem from the human perspective (vv. 8–9).

fight more astutely against the false teachers who preyed on them with twisted theology (v. 16).

Peter's eschatology, as a weapon for the fight, covers the following aspects. First, Christ's return is imminent (v. 10), and will come when his patience, which should be considered a gracious opportunity for salvation (v. 15; cf. 2 Cor 6:2; Acts 2:40), runs out (cf. 2 Pet 3:9; Phil 4:5; James 5:8–9; Rev 3:11; 22:7, 12, 20). The timing of the return of Christ is sovereignly determined based on when Christ completes his saving work in this epoch. Second, the events of the *parousia* will ultimately usher in drastic cosmic changes, and such knowledge is motive for believers in the interim to remain unmovable in their faith and exhibit the fruit of holiness and godliness in all their affairs (2 Pet 3:11–12).

The missionary is tasked with proclaiming the predictions that come from the OT and NT prophets. Knowing the future is designed to impact the present. Precisely because the Lord has promised that the new heavens and a new earth will be inhabited in righteousness (v. 13), the believer must now practice righteousness (v. 14). Despite the fiery trials now being faced (cf. 1 Pet 4:12), and no matter the global upheaval to come (2 Pet 3:10, 12), true believers must live in peace (3:14). Peace now, in view of the coming cosmic chaos, is true stability of heart and mind (vv. 16–17). The missionary must stave off the perversion that comes from biblical ignorance (v. 16). Peter sees eternal fruit in the proper understanding of eschatology: believing and applying the truths of the *parousia* lead to growth in “in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ” and ultimately the ascription of more glory to Him “both now and to the day of eternity” (v. 18). Such is the hope for believers in all cultures of all generations, until the Lord has accomplished the fullness of His salvation.

Summary

There are many purposes for teaching eschatology in the foreign context from a distinctly dispensational perspective. The dispensational eschatology is not some vague, esoteric, or sideline enterprise that the missionary can take or leave when making indigenous disciples.

Understanding the prophetic hermeneutic is significant for the Christian's convictions today in at least three ways. First, the believer has a sure future upon which to fix his or her thoughts so that during the fiercest of earthly trials he or she may hold an unwavering hope in the ultimate rescue of Christ. Second, biblical clarity on the fate of those who are not caught up in the air demands a level of urgency in evangelism and ethical conduct among unbelievers so that they might be won to Christ and saved from his targeted wrath. Third, the delay in returning has thus far given believers more opportunity to follow Christ in his virtues, namely by cultivating patience and steadfast faith, and a richer sanctification during this time of sojourn.

It has been sufficiently established that the missionary must treat the whole of Scripture's teaching on the end time's events with clarity and precision, for the good of the local disciples. The dispensational framework for eschatology is both true to the text and relevant to daily life, and so a global theology built upon the dispensational framework will benefit the mission of the local church. As the select NT passages demonstrate, the concept of a surprise rapture event and *parousia*, when interpreted with a consistent literalism, helps contend for the faith, provides the impetus to live a holy life, and calls the believer to serve the coming king with urgency. On the other hand, an eschatology that is not built from a consistent interpretation of prophecy may lead to weaker faith. When key exhortations designed for these presently dark days is hidden from the church, the battle for biblical living becomes unnecessarily difficult.

Missiology in View of the Millennium

Belief in the premillennial physical return of Jesus Christ generates a natural desire to understand what the Bible has to say about the location and nature of his return. Where he goes and what he does in the future is of great importance to every dispensationalist. Because the millennium is not yet realized, global evangelism and theological training today must be done with the expectation of Christ's imminent return and closure of the church age. Such expectancy requires expediency—doing faithful ministry with hope and urgency to bring God glory now. From the missiological standpoint, then, it is vital to know how

Scripture portrays the future for church age believers and the nation of Israel in the eschaton. Dispensationalism permits as clear a picture of the millennial reign of Christ as possible from Scripture. Consistent literalism avoids assigning some arbitrary significance to Israel.⁴⁴ Rather, the dispensational hermeneutic ties Israel's future to the Messianic hope which all Jewish people hold to some degree even today.⁴⁵

⁴⁴ Rather, the glory of Christ will be seen in physical Jerusalem when he comes to reign, and later the eternal presence of God will reside in the New Jerusalem of the eternal state. It is problematic to downgrade the reality of the physical city of Jerusalem to a local concept that applies to any sort of missionary activity, as Ed Stetzer has done: "We Christians will each want to do all we can to fulfill our own mission—from our own Jerusalem." A poor exegesis of the Jerusalem Council (p. 590) and statements of Jerusalem's transitory influence in NT witness (see esp. 585–86) flatten Stetzer's argument to a mishmash of unguarded concepts, such as his Pentecost reference: "Let us wait in one accord for the coming of the Spirit" in order to advance the mission of God outside of provincial legalism (593). While Stetzer's ethical exhortation to pursue mission is not missed, using Jerusalem as an allegorical motif disconnects the historical geopolitical capital from its future in God's plan and purpose for the city. See Ed Stetzer, "The Trouble with our Jerusalems," in *Discovering the Mission of God: Best Missional Practices for the 21st Century*, ed. Mike Barnett (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2012), 585–99.

Indian theologian Eliya Mohol runs in a similar direction as Stetzer in defining the missional trajectory of many different forms of Zionism. After he treats the biblical concept of Zion as the physical location of Jerusalem and hub of eschatological missionary activity, he traces the transcendent principles of love and unity which bind syncretistic forms of Zionism in India, South Korea, and South Africa. Mohol's objective is not to point out error in light of Scripture, but to urge Christian Zionists to remove Jerusalem from the center of eschatological import and rather hold to the purely ethical goals of the syncretized groups: "The monotheistic groups that want to lay exclusive claims on the physical Jerusalem can learn lessons from these universal communities in emphasizing the ideals of Zion and not hankering after land in Jerusalem" (Eliya Mohol, "Zion," in *Dictionary of Mission Theology: Evangelical Foundations*, ed. John Corrie [Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2007], 450).

⁴⁵ Eliya Mohol recognizes a modicum of Zionist expectation in all participants of Jewish celebrations when they pray "May the Redeemer

In the briefest of snapshots, the following statements summarize select biblical evidence for a millennial kingdom. Jesus Christ will sit on David's throne (Matt 19:28; 25:31), according to the Davidic covenant (2 Sam 7:13, 16; Ps 89:3–4, 35–37), in the physical city of Jerusalem (cf. Zech 8:20–23) for a one-thousand year reign of peace and justice (Rev 20:4–7; Zech 14:9; cf. 1 Cor 15:24–28). By that time, “all Israel” will be saved (Rom 11:25–29) so that the promise of the Abrahamic covenant will be fulfilled in the land (Gen 12:1–3). In the millennium the land covenant of Deuteronomy 29–30 will finally be realized and the borders of Israel will be restored to the fullest extent for the Jewish people when they convert to serve Messiah as their rightful King. Only when the salvation of the Gentiles is complete (Rom 11:25; cf. Luke 21:24) and the judicial act of spiritually blinding Israel is reversed will the millennial kingdom be established and the biblical covenants be fulfilled.⁴⁶

The coming reality of the millennium affects the missionary's ethic today. Because the millennium will one day come, missionaries need to discern the types of activities worth engaging in the nations. If missionary activity today is to be done in light of Jesus Christ's millennial reign, then at least a few key considerations come into play.

1. The missionary must engage in individual evangelism and making faithful disciples.

All missionaries are initially tasked with bringing individuals from all nations and worldviews to the saving knowledge of the King of Kings, that they might worship him as the only God. There is no room for a fatalism that would impede evangelism: even though many sinners will one day die for their active rebellion against God (John 8:24; Rom 6:23; cf. 1 John 3:4; Isa 59:2), the missionary should be motivated by God's patience in the

come to Zion,” or they greet one another, “Next year in Jerusalem!” (Mohol, “Zion,” 449–50).

⁴⁶ Benware, *Understanding End Times Prophecy*, 216.

current dispensation (2 Pet 3:9) to labor in any way useful for the salvation of even a few (1 Cor 9:19–23).

A further antidote to fatalism today is to consider the need for evangelism in the millennium, even when there are no false religions or idols competing with the Lordship of Christ. Understanding that there will be a final rebellion of the apostate children of believers in the millennium (Rev 20:8–9) is a reminder that even at a time of unparalleled peace there should be the desire to mercifully and fearfully rescue as many sinners as possible from their impending destruction (Jude 22–23).

Conversion, however, is itself not the goal but the gateway to a God-glorifying life. Today's believer must be discipled into a mature person who will serve the King now, throughout the millennium, and into eternity (cf. Rev 5:10). Making biblical disciples requires great toil in the indigenous church because it involves the transformation of the believer's cultural orientation (cf. Titus 1:12–13).

Biblical discipleship also strikes against the common evangelistic practice of open-air campaigns, which are common to the Third World. Such campaigns tends to focus on mass conversion without a discipleship strategy at the local church level.⁴⁷

The body of Christ has but one King, Jesus Christ, who reigns spiritually now, and will physically reign from David's throne in the millennium. Therefore, the missionary must labor to ensure that formerly false worshippers who proclaim Christ now submit to his lordship and put an end to dual authority—a syncretized faith in Christ that is marked by old, unbiblical ways of thinking and acting (cf. Titus 1:13–2:1).⁴⁸

⁴⁷ Thanks go to South African theology student, Warrick Jubber, whose personal experiences with tent campaigns corroborate my own observations in South Africa, Uganda, Kenya, border towns of Mexico, Dominican Republic, and southern regions of Italy.

⁴⁸ So Eckhard Schnabel, *Paul the Missionary: Realities, Strategies, and Methods* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity 2008), 28–29.

2. The missionary must invest in training pastors for the ministry of the local church.

True disciples are maturing Christians, and spiritual growth happens, by God's design, through the godly leadership of Christ's under-shepherds in the local church (1 Pet 5:1–5). Paul and his missionary delegates considered the raising up of elders for the church worth their greatest efforts (Titus 1:5; 1 Tim 1:3, 5–7, 18–19).

Elders are themselves to be mature men, qualified to give spiritual oversight to souls in their care (Heb 13:7, 17; cf. Titus 1:6–9; 1 Tim 3:1–7). The elder best suited to teach eschatology in the church is the one who accurately handle God's Word and puts it into practice in his own life. Both the prophetic content and the application need to come from a man who believes it and lives it, otherwise his disciples will see right through his flimsy convictions and find more excuses for not living according to his exhortations. Of course, raising up elders of this caliber first requires that the missionary himself be such a man shaped by theological clarity and personal conviction (cf. Paul and Barnabas in Acts 14:21–23).

Local church leadership must make great pains to be the kinds of examples their people should imitate. Living for Christ, and if necessary, dying for him as martyrs, is the biblical antidote to any local church member who self-identifies as a victim of the corrupt, persecuting world. The indigenous pastor must teach radical sacrifice to his people, no matter how oppressed or materially challenged they may be (cf. 2 Cor 8:1–5). The eschatological passages on reward provide the kind of daily motivation to live and serve the King with an unwavering heart despite earthly circumstances (Dan 12:3; Matt 5:10–12; 16:27; 25:20–23; 1 Cor 3:8, 11–15; Phil 3:14; 2 Tim 4:8; 1 Pet 5:3; Rev 22:12).

Furthermore, certainty of the millennial kingdom in which Christ is physically present enables radical sacrifice because of the confidence it engenders for a

future of peace and plenty. And beyond the blessing and prosperity of the millennium, believers are promised the ultimate comfort of a sin-free world—in the new heaven and new earth He will wipe away every tear (Rev 21:4; cf. 1 Cor 15:24–28).

3. The missionary *must not* prioritize activities that compete with or compromise the mission of the church.

Basic Christian duty must at least include upholding human dignity, maintaining a godly reputation in practical dealings with government, and responsibly preserving the environment as a stewardship. Thus, from one perspective, social, political, and environmental activities can be good ways to testify to the upright moral and societal conduct befitting a disciple of Christ. Dispensational missionaries, however, must discern ways in which even good activities can exceed the biblical mandate and betray the missiology that derives from their hermeneutic.

Faithfulness in missionary service can be measured by the correlation between prophecy and practice. Assigning environmental priority over church planting, for example, would show no correlation between prophecy and practice. The earth itself groans for renewal, but the renewal will only come in the millennium (Rom 8:18–22). No man can fully realize the reverse of the curse on the earth in this age; only the God-Man can fulfill bring renewal in the future (cf. Isa 35:1–2; 65:21–22, 25; Joel 3:18).

Dispensational missiology also decries the problems of viewing social justice and political restoration as the work of the church. Walking in the light of God might be the present reality of some individuals from many nations, but in the millennium the nations, no longer under the deception of Satan (Rev 20:3), will flock to the city of Jerusalem to apply Christ's justice in their governments (Isa 2:2–5; cf. 60:3). Christ will teach God's law to them from his seat in Jerusalem as the head of all

world governments (2:3), and he will judge the political and legal cases they bring to him (2:4). His justice will seem right to the nations, such that they apply his law and become peaceful nations (2:4). Yet, today, the nations are not submitted to the lordship of Christ but are submitted to the deceiver who rules over the whole world (2 Cor 4:4; Eph 2:2; cf. Rev 12:9).

It is important, therefore, for the missionary to ask whether his involvement in a particular environmental, social, or political cause competes for time and resources with evangelistic and discipleship strategies that are in line with the dispensational eschatology.⁴⁹ If so, the activity risks shifting the missionary's focus from urgent gospel proclamation to a pragmatic "Christianization" effort. In such a case the missionary will have ignored the eschatological reality with a misplaced zeal, and must work to realign his "holistic mission" efforts with the true work of the church.⁵⁰ If the aid the missionary provides

⁴⁹ Joel James and Brian Biedebach, long-term missionaries to Southern Africa report on "holistic missions" from the front lines with the following assessment: "Social action projects are like black holes—they have a habit of sucking in all the ecclesiastical resources within reach of their gravitational pull. While the theory states that the gospel, preaching, and the church are the main things, in regard to budgets, planning, staff, and effort, what's actually first is all too clear" (Joel James and Brian Biedebach, "Regaining Our Focus: A Response to the Social Action Trend in Evangelical Missions, *The Master's Seminary Journal* 25, no. 1 [Spring 2014]: 36).

James and Biedebach also comment that the increasing connection between social justice and gospel ministry in the church has led to confusion by those involved in promoting and supporting the mission of the church: "Pastors and missions committees barely seem aware of the distinction between missionaries who focus on social action and missionaries who focus on Bible translation, theological training, church planting, and gospel proclamation" (ibid., 33).

⁵⁰ As a basic guideline, any specifically non-evangelistic, non-disciple-making activity that can be better conducted by a local government ought to be done through the local government, or by a non-governmental office (NGO) tasked with executing the program. From a more spiritual perspective, the dispensational missionary must be sure that the activities of

does not fit squarely into the church planting motif, then his activities do not fit squarely with Scripture.⁵¹ He must change course quickly, because the Lord could return at any time, and he will have to give an account of his stewardship.

Conclusion

Promoting a dispensational eschatology as the basis for a faithful missiology is not only reasonable but right. A consistently literal approach to interpreting prophecy provides a strong theological framework with a clear eschatological trajectory from which to develop missiological teaching and practice. It could be said that a “dispensational missiology” today is the continuation of the missionary strategy employed by the apostles. Several NT passages highlight the attitude and priorities befitting the missionary, and set a standard from which to evaluate field activities. In this way, dispensationalism provides not only interpretive clarity concerning the text, but direction for today’s practices. The living Word jumps off the page and onto the field!

Hopefully this preliminary attempt to formulate a “dispensational missiology” will lead to other treatments that look both behind and ahead, to the history and the future of

establishing Third World hospitals, irrigation projects, and cleaning polluted environments, for example, serve legitimate kingdom purposes in this dispensation.

⁵¹ Meeting temporal, physical needs should be primarily an act of spiritual compassion with the goal of leading people to Jesus, the Bread of Life, who met the needs of the hungry and the sick (Matt 14:15–21; 15:30–38) not only for the temporary good of the people but to proclaim the gospel (John 6:26–27, 35–38). James and Biedebach conclude for their African context: “Long after the AIDS orphans have grown up, the wells have been blocked with sand, and the medical clinics have closed due to a lack of Western funding, the people of Africa will need churches to preach the gospel of Jesus Christ. But if the Western church continues to send missionaries focused on social action, who will plant and pastor those churches? The church in Africa and around the world can flourish, but it takes the right kind of national leaders, and from the West, it takes the right kind of missionaries doing what only Christians can do” (ibid., 50).

missiology. It would be helpful to discuss the historic missionary service by dispensationalists over the last century and a half. How did the early faith missions and early Christian Zionists apply the dispensational hermeneutic to the work of the church across the globe? Was their ethos and practice compatible with this “dispensational missiology”? Likewise, it would be useful to analyze the history of non-dispensational missionary efforts to see areas of missiological contrast. Did employing a different interpretive method for prophecy lead to different goals, strategies, and results on the field? Have revisions to non-dispensational theological systems over time changed the tenets and practices of mission?

As to the direction of mission theory and practice, further work needs to be done to challenge today’s prevalent contextualization practices in light of the eschatological teaching of Scripture. One example is immediately within reach: dispensational missiology confronts “felt need” evangelism strategies and calls for their revision. In reaction to the cultural and spiritual felt needs of a society or people group, it is common practice to substitute the clear proclamation of the gospel for roundtable dialogue and a variety of alternatives to direct, propositional evangelism, which may include socially-oriented programs which do little more than provide secular aid under the Christian banner of “mercy.”⁵² Such missions efforts are tragically misplaced in view of Christ’s return, because when he comes he will judge every person who remains in his sin (Rom 2:6–8), and will judge the missionary as to his gospel priority (2 Cor 5:10; 2 Tim 2:5; cf. Rom 14:10–12). Truly loving sinners means placing socio-cultural felt needs in subjection to “ultimate

⁵² For example, individual evangelism stands in stark contrast to the tenets of liberation theology, particularly in Latin America, where the ultimate eschatological goal is the complete man in a complete society, a people group with limitless potential to rise above their current oppression through the restructuring of socio-economic and political structures. For discussion of the eschatology of liberation theology, see Emilio A. Núñez and William D. Taylor, *Crisis in Latin America: An Evangelical Perspective* (Chicago: Moody, 1989), 273–75.

needs, those seen from God's perspective."⁵³ The missionary must labor to make unashamed workmen of all disciples, no matter how difficult the task. The Lord is coming quickly (Rev 22:20), and one day, when all the nations worship the one true God in spirit and in truth, the missionary will see "the triumph of hope realized."⁵⁴

⁵³ Tim Matheny, *Reaching the Arabs—A Felt Need Approach* (Pasadena: William Carey Library, 1981), 153.

⁵⁴ Peters, *Biblical Theology of Missions*, 326.

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