

PREMILLENNIALISM AND HERMENEUTICS

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The purpose of this article is to identify the primary hermeneutical issues at the center of the divide over eschatology, while providing a brief premillennial response to each. The first of these issues concerns the legitimacy of literal interpretation with respect to prophetic texts. The second concerns the function of progressive revelation and the relationship of subsequent revelation to antecedent revelation. The third concerns the influence of presupposition, particularly as it relates to the analogy of faith and the impact of Platonic dualism on the Christian’s approach to Scripture.

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Introduction

Discussions about biblical eschatology—the study of the Bible’s teaching about future things—divide over one pivotal event: *the timing of the second coming of Jesus Christ*. In particular, disagreement over this central piece in God’s redemptive plan relates to what the apostle John described as a “thousand-year” reign of the Messiah in Revelation 20:1–6.¹ Three general positions developed throughout church history.

First, the oldest view of the church, *premillennialism*,² contends that the second coming of Christ occurs *prior to* (“pre-”) the millennium described by John.³ In other words, premillennialism teaches that Christ will return in order to establish a physical kingdom on earth as described by a non-figurative interpretation of Revelation 20:1–

¹ The phrase “thousand years” (χίλια ἔτη) is repeated six times in Revelation 20:1–7. The term “chiliasm” is derived from the Greek adjective χίλια (*chilia*, “thousand”). Chiliasm was the designation used in the early church to describe the belief that Jesus’ reign on earth during this “thousand years” was to be understood literally. Early proponents of chiliasm included Papias, Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, and Tertullian. See Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church: Ante-Nicene Christianity* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1884), 614.

² Donald K. McKim, *Theological Turning Points* (Louisville, KY: John Knox, 1988), 155; Stanley Grenz, *The Millennial Maze* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1992), 38; and Roger E. Olson, *The Westminster Handbook to Evangelical Theology* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox, 2004), 171.

³ The prefix *mille* in “millennial” or “millennium” is the Latin equivalent of the Greek χίλια.

6. This kingdom will not begin until Christ returns, and it will end one thousand years later with the establishment of the new heavens and the new earth of Revelation 21–22.

Amillennialism, a later development in church history,⁴ rejects the concept of a literal, one thousand-year period of history (hence the “a-” negation). Amillennialists certainly assert that Christ will return, but not with respect to an earthly kingdom. The description given in Revelation 20:1–6 is to be understood symbolically—not literally. Christ *already* reigns in his kingdom—not from earth, but from heaven; and not for a thousand years, but for an indefinite period of time. This kingdom does not necessarily manifest itself in world politics but is largely invisible. This kingdom ends with the second advent of Christ, who returns to inaugurate the new heavens and the new earth.⁵

Postmillennialism, the most recent view in church history,⁶ places the second coming of Christ *at the end of* (“post-”) the millennium. Like amillennialism, postmillennialism does not believe that Christ will reign physically on the earth. He already reigns as Lord of all. Either Christ’s church will eventually overtake all aspects of society in every nation of the world through the spread of the gospel (and thus inaugurate a distinctively “Christian” millennium of world history), or this millennium—understood figuratively—already began with the preaching of the gospel at Pentecost. In any case, Christ will return *after* this “millennium” in order to usher in the eternal state.

Discussions about biblical eschatology do not get easier at this point. In fact, within each of these three main views we find variations. For example, under the umbrella of premillennialism we find “historic” premillennialism (which is better called “covenantal” premillennialism) and “dispensational” premillennialism (sometimes called “futuristic” premillennialism).⁷ While both covenantal and dispensational premillennial proponents believe that Christ will return prior to an earthly reign, they disagree on a good number of important points about the nature of His return and reign—particularly as it relates to the nation of Israel. Disagreements within the camps of amillennialism and postmillennialism are also noteworthy.

Ultimately, advocates of all three major perspectives stand in solidarity with each other over the authority, necessity, inerrancy, and sufficiency of Scripture. They agree over the person and work of Jesus Christ—His virgin birth, His divine and human natures, His sinless life, His substitutionary atonement, His bodily resurrection, and His future return. They stand with each other in their proclamation that man

⁴ Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, 619.

⁵ Because of its symbolic interpretation of Revelation 20:1–6, amillennialism can be described as *realized millennialism*—as teaching that the “thousand years” of Christ’s reign, Satan’s incarceration in the abyss, and the believer’s reign with Christ is a present reality, not a future stage of God’s plan for human history.

⁶ R. G. Clouse, “Views of the Millennium,” in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, ed. Walter A. Elwell (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2001), 772.

⁷ See Richard Mayhue, “Why Futuristic Premillennialism,” in *Christ’s Prophetic Plans: A Futuristic Premillennial Primer*, ed. John MacArthur and Richard Mayhue (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2012), 59–84.

is saved only by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone. However, they are intensely divided over the Bible's teaching about the future. Such disagreement raises an all-important question: *Why are there so many significant differences?* Or as John Walvoord expressed, "How can it be that reputable scholars who agree on many basic Christian doctrines interpret the prophetic portions of Scripture with such differing results? How can this be explained?"⁸

In a word, the cause for the divergence is *hermeneutics*. Certainly, there are other presuppositions which affect the discussion to varying degrees.⁹ But the most fundamental cause for the disagreement that exists over eschatology relates to the principles employed in the process of interpreting the pertinent texts. While pre-, a-, and post-millennialists may all agree that the Bible is the ultimate authority and the only source of knowledge pertaining to future events, the problem is that they do not agree over the method of its interpretation.¹⁰

This article's purpose is to identify and summarize the decisive hermeneutical issues at the crux of the divide over eschatology. Three issues specifically can be identified as having exceptional influence on one's eschatological position:

- (1) the legitimacy of literal interpretation;
- (2) the function of progressive revelation; and
- (3) the influence of theological presupposition.

Where one falls on these three hermeneutical issues will largely determine where one stands concerning the timing of the second coming of Jesus Christ.

1. The Legitimacy of Literal Interpretation

The first key hermeneutical issue which affects any discussion about eschatology is *the position one takes regarding the legitimacy of a literal approach to interpretation*. The term "literal" has traditionally been used to summarize the premillennialist approach to biblical interpretation.¹¹ But more than just affirming literal interpretation as one good approach among many, premillennialism—and dispensational

⁸ John F. Walvoord, "Basic Considerations in Interpreting Prophecy," in *Vital Prophetic Issues*, ed. Roy B. Zuck (reprint; Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2006), 14.

⁹ E.g., see Stanley N. Gundry, "Hermeneutics or *Zeitgeist* as the Determining Factor in the History of Eschatologies?," *JETS* 20, no. 1 (March 1977): 45–55.

¹⁰ Walvoord states, "the diversity is not based on the premise that the Bible in some respects is untrue; instead, the difficulty arises in various schools of interpretation" ("Basic Considerations," 14). Postmillennialist Loraine Boettner agrees, stating that eschatological differences arise "primarily out of the distinctive method employed by each in the interpretation of Scripture" (Loraine Boettner, *Christianity Today* 2, no. 25 [September 29, 1958], 13).

¹¹ It is not within the scope of this article to provide a detailed definition of "literal interpretation" and its defense. To summarize, "literal interpretation" can be equated with the grammatico-historical method, which Robert Thomas succinctly defines as "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" (Robert L. Thomas, *Introduction to Exegesis* [Tyndale Seminary Press, 2014], 24).

premillennialism in particular—is committed to the *consistent practice* of literal interpretation in all parts of Scripture, including its prophetic portions.¹² So central is this commitment that Charles Ryrie claimed it as a *sine qua non* of dispensational premillennialism.¹³

Until more recently this connection was acknowledged even by premillennialism’s critics.¹⁴ For example, O. T. Allis, a prominent twentieth-century spokesman for the amillennial camp, described dispensational premillennialism in this light:

Literal interpretation has always been a marked feature of Premillennialism; in Dispensationalism it has been carried to an extreme. We have seen that this literalism found its most thoroughgoing expression in the claim that Israel must mean Israel, that it cannot mean the Church, that the Old Testament prophecies regarding Israel concern the earthly Israel, and that the Church was a mystery, unknown to the prophets and first made known to the apostle Paul. Now if the principle of interpretation is adopted that Israel always means Israel, that it does not mean the Church, then it follows of necessity that practically all of our information regarding the millennium will concern a Jewish or Israelitish age.¹⁵

Another critic of premillennialism, Floyd Hamilton, also acknowledged that “we must frankly admit that a literal interpretation of the Old Testament prophecies gives us just such a picture of an earthly reign of the Messiah as the premillennialist pictures.”¹⁶ Postmillennialist Loraine Boettner concurred, stating, “It is generally agreed that if the prophecies are to be taken literally, they do foretell a restoration of the nation of Israel in the land of Palestine with the Jews having a prominent place in that kingdom and ruling over the other nations.”¹⁷

¹² Charles Ryrie, *Dispensationalism Today* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1965), 86, 89. See also the first four chapters of J. Dwight Pentecost, *Things to Come: A Study in Biblical Eschatology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1958), which are devoted to matters of interpretation. Covenantal premillennialism, though generally committed to a literal hermeneutic, differs from dispensational premillennialism in its consistency in applying that method.

¹³ Ryrie, *Dispensationalism Today*, 43ff. Ryrie justified this connection by claiming that (1) the nature of language itself requires literal interpretation as its starting point; (2) the literal fulfillment of OT prophecies concerning Christ’s first advent establishes literal interpretation; and (3) the danger of subjectivity in interpretation demands literal interpretation (Charles Ryrie, *Dispensationalism*, rev. ed. (Chicago: Moody Press, 1995), 54).

¹⁴ The connection between non-premillennial eschatologies and an anti-literal stance is illustrated in the shift from premillennialism to amillennialism in the third and fourth centuries of church history. As the influence of the Alexandrian school’s allegorical approach to Scripture grew, premillennialism was increasingly viewed as a heretical aberration (cf. Gundry, “Hermeneutics or *Zeitgeist*,” 47).

¹⁵ Oswald T. Allis, *Prophecy and the Church* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1945), 244. Allis admitted that if this literal approach is applied consistently to all of Scripture, one will end up in the premillennial camp: “the Old Testament prophecies if literally interpreted cannot be regarded as having been yet fulfilled or as being capable of fulfillment in this present age” (ibid., 238).

¹⁶ Floyd E. Hamilton, *The Basis of the Millennial Faith* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1955), 38.

¹⁷ Loraine Boettner, “Postmillennialism,” in *The Meaning of the Millennium: Four Views*, ed. Robert G. Clouse (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1977), 95.

How is the validity of this commitment to consistent literal interpretation challenged? Critics contest it on two primary fronts.

Literal Interpretation and Its Sustainability

First, the older and more traditional critique is that a commitment to a consistently literal approach to the Bible is simply *unsustainable*. While it can be applied to certain kinds of literature in Scripture, it cannot be applied generally to all. And while it may serve as one step of the interpretive process, it is not all there is to that process.

This bias against consistently literal interpretation can be observed in all non-dispensational (i.e., covenantal) forms of eschatology. For example, postmillennialist Kenneth Gentry states, “Despite the vigorous assertions of dispensationalists, ‘consistent literalism’ is an impossible ideal.”¹⁸ Another critic, amillennialist Vern Poythress, argues that “Grammatical-historical interpretation”—a synonymous designation for literal interpretation—“is only one moment in the total act of interpretation.”¹⁹ After reviewing the commentary produced by dispensationalist Robert Thomas on Revelation 1–7, Poythress concludes,

This principle of “literal if possible” is particularly misleading when used with apocalyptic literature, since it forces on the literature an inappropriate, stringent idea of “literalism,” wildly underestimating the pervasiveness of symbolism. Thomas makes sound judgments on some minor points . . . but the over-all impact is dominated by the initial decision in favor of literalism. The book cannot be recommended.²⁰

Also responding to a literal approach to the book of Revelation, Craig Blomberg states, “the exclusively prophetic interpretation usually insists on an *impossibly literal hermeneutic* which is therefore inevitably applied inconsistently.”²¹

To a large extent such criticism reflects confusion or disagreement over the meaning of the term “literal.” While proponents from all three main eschatological views openly embrace literal interpretation to some extent, it is common for critics

¹⁸ Kenneth L. Gentry, Jr., *He Shall Have Dominion: A Postmillennial Eschatology* (Tyler, TX: Institute for Christian Economics, 1992), 146.

¹⁹ Vern S. Poythress, *Understanding Dispensationalists* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1987), 91.

²⁰ Vern S. Poythress, “Review of Robert L. Thomas, *Revelation 1–7: An Exegetical Commentary*,” *WTJ* 55, no. 1 (Spring 1993), 165. Poythress makes this comment in response to Thomas’ admission of his hermeneutical commitment: “The proper procedure is to assume a literal interpretation of each symbolic representation provided to John unless a particular factor in the text indicates it should be interpreted figuratively” (Robert L. Thomas, *Revelation 1–7: An Exegetical Commentary* [Chicago: Moody Press, 1992], 36).

²¹ Craig L. Blomberg, “New Testament Genre Criticism for the 1990s,” *Themelios* 15, no. 2 (January/ February 1990), 46; emphasis added.

to describe dispensational premillennialism’s interpretive approach as “woodenly literal” or even as “hyper-literalism”²²—as if premillennialists by default reject the existence of figures of speech in Scripture or have no appreciation for its diverse literary styles. Gentry even warns that a commitment to consistent, literal interpretation would inevitably lead to some of the same kind of errors advocated by Mormon founder Joseph Smith, who interpreted Scripture’s anthropomorphic descriptions of God “literally” and concluded that God did indeed have a physical body.²³ Gentry argues that any claim to consistency in literal interpretation would seem to require the dispensationalist to conclude that Jesus is actually a physical door (cf. John 10:9).²⁴ But, he contends, the fact that no dispensationalist believes that Jesus is indeed a literal door demonstrates that a commitment to consistent literal interpretation is ultimately untenable.²⁵ Accordingly, critics of premillennialism argue that an anti-premillennial stance is necessitated even by the sheer need to oppose such interpretive naiveté and its devastating consequences.

Literal Interpretation and Its Credibility

A second and more recent argument against the claim to consistent literal interpretation made by dispensationalists in particular is that it turns out to be *misleading*—and perhaps even *untruthful*. Critics argue that dispensationalists are actually much more inconsistent or selective in their application of a literal hermeneutic than they acknowledge. Gentry’s criticism is representative: “Besides being naïve, the dispensational claim to ‘consistent literalism’ is frustrating due to its *inconsistent* employment.”²⁶

Moreover, non-dispensationalists increasingly claim that they are much more literal in their methods of interpreting Scripture than previously recognized. For example, amillennialist Kim Riddlebarger states:

The dispensationalists’ literalistic reading of prophetic passages must not be confused with a literal reading. . . . *It is amillennarians, not dispensationalists,*

²² E.g., William Cox, *Amillennialism Today* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1972), 21, 23, 64, etc.

²³ Gentry, *He Shall Have Dominion*, 152–53. Gentry shows his misunderstanding of the premillennial claim to literal interpretation when he asks in response, “May not so rich a work as the Bible, dedicated to such a lofty and spiritual theme (the infinite God’s redemption of sinful man), written by many authors over 1,500 years employ a variety of literary genres? No symbols? No metaphors? No analogies?” (*ibid.*, 147). Dispensationalists do not deny the existence of these things.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 148.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 153.

²⁶ Gentry, *He Shall Have Dominion*, 153; emphasis original. See also Anthony Hoekema, “An Amillennial Response,” in *The Meaning of the Millennium: Four Views*, ed. Robert G. Clouse (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1977), 105–27; Keith A. Mathison, *Dispensationalism: Rightly Dividing the People of God?* (Phillipsburg, PA: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1995), 6.

who interpret prophecy literally in that they follow the literal sense of how the writers of the New Testament interpret Old Testament prophecy.²⁷

Even some who still prefer to call themselves “dispensationalists,” but who seek considerable rapprochement with non-dispensational schools of thought, now argue that a commitment to the literal, grammatico-historical approach “is shared broadly in evangelicalism,” to such an extent that dispensationalists cannot think of themselves “as having an exclusive hermeneutic.”²⁸ Blaising states, “for many scholars to say the difference (between a dispensationalist and a non-dispensationalist) is simply between literal and spiritual exegesis is not accurate and is in fact misleading.”²⁹ According to this line of argumentation, the cause of the divergence between the different eschatological views is actually *not* hermeneutical in nature.

Consequently, critics of premillennialism, especially of its dispensational perspective, now call for the claim to “literal interpretation” to be abandoned. The terminology is considered unhelpful and misleading. It has no clear definition. It has suffered the defeat of a thousand qualifications. Moreover, to claim it as a *sine qua non* of a particular eschatological position lacks integrity, since all sides appeal to it and yet no side can employ it consistently. Boettner states,

One does not have to read far in the Bible to discover that not everything can be taken literally. We find no labels in the Scripture itself telling us, “Take this literally,” or “Take that figuratively.” Evidently the individual reader must use his own judgment, backed by as much experience and common sense as he can muster. And that, of course, will vary endlessly from individual to individual.³⁰

Willem VanGemenen is even more pessimistic:

[A]ny eschatological discussion presupposes the Creator-creature distinction, as God is God and his revelation to man of himself and of the eschaton is in the form of accommodation, permitting us to see through a glass darkly. We stand in the presence of God with awe, as he is sovereign and free. In his sovereignty and freedom he has revealed aspects of his eternal plan in *time*, in the *language*

²⁷ Kim Riddlebarger, *The Case of Amillennialism: Understanding End Times* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003), 40; emphasis added. Or as John H. Sailhammer states, “Both millennialists and nonmillennialists hold tenaciously to the claim of a ‘literal’ hermeneutic, though both sides apply it in quite different ways and in ways largely unacceptable to the other” (“The Hermeneutics of Premillennialism,” *Faith and Mission* 18, no. 1 [Fall 2000], 97).

²⁸ Craig A. Blaising and Darrell L. Bock, “Dispensationalism, Israel and the Church: Assessment and Dialogue,” in *Dispensationalism, Israel and the Church: The Search for Definition*, ed. Craig A. Blaising and Darrell L. Bock (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), 380; cf. also Craig A. Blaising and Darrell L. Bock, *Progressive Dispensationalism* (Wheaton, IL: Victor, 1993) 35–37. For an analysis of this “progressive” form of dispensationalism, see Robert L. Thomas, “The Hermeneutics of Progressive Dispensationalism,” *MSJ* 6, no. 2 (Spring 1992): 79–95.

²⁹ Craig A. Blaising, “Developing Dispensationalism, Part 2: Development of Dispensationalism by Contemporary Dispensationalists,” *BSac* 145 (July–September 1988), 270–71.

³⁰ Boettner, “Postmillennialism,” in *The Meaning of the Millennium*, 134.

of man, and in *metaphors*. Therefore, it is impossible to *bind* God to any eschatological (millennial) system.³¹

Perhaps Vern Poythress sums up the criticism best when he states, “What is literal interpretation? It is a confusing term, capable of being used to beg many of the questions at stake in the interpretation of the Bible. We had best not use the phrase.”³²

Reaffirming the Legitimacy of Consistent Literal Interpretation

Despite these criticisms, the claim to a consistently literal hermeneutic must not be abandoned. To do so would be to concede the argument at its most fundamental level. But how can it be correctly affirmed?

First, discussions about eschatology must give attention at the very start to identifying the key terms related to hermeneutics and providing clear and careful definitions. Feinberg points to this need when he states, “The difference is not literalism v. non-literalism, but different understandings of what constitutes literal hermeneutics.”³³ He continues,

With this kind of confusion, it is understandable that dispensationalists have many questions about nondispensational hermeneutics. My main point, though, is that confusion (and surely there is also confusion among dispensational thinkers) over whether these practices are literal or non-literal (let alone confusion over what practices are correct) illustrates the need for clearer thinking on the issue. Raising these issues does not settle them, but we can make some headway while noting hermeneutical differences between the systems.³⁴

Confusion over and misuse of terminology is a significant cause of frustration for believers navigating discussions about eschatology. While some wish to disband with such terms as “literal” for the very reason that they require careful definition and qualification, in reality many very important and essential theology terms require the same nuancing (“trinity,” “inerrancy,” etc.).

³¹ Willem VanGemeren, “Systems of Continuity,” in *Continuity and Discontinuity: Perspectives on the Relationship between the Old and New Testament*, ed. by John S. Feinberg (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1988), 62; emphasis original.

³² Poythress, *Understanding Dispensationalists*, 96. A similar position is taken by Darrell L. Bock, “Why I Am a Dispensationalist with a Small ‘d,’” *JETS* 41, no. 3 (September 1998), 388–89.

³³ John S. Feinberg, “Systems of Discontinuity,” in *Continuity and Discontinuity*, 73.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 74. An example of this can be seen in the confusion of terminology. For example, whereas in the past an affirmation of the grammatico-historical method of exegesis—interpreting language according to its natural grammatical sense as dictated by its original historical-linguistic context—was synonymous with an affirmation of literal interpretation, some critics of dispensational premillennialism today argue for what is called “historical-grammatical, yet non-literal interpretation” (R. Fowler White, “On the Hermeneutics and Interpretation of Rev 20:1–3: A Preconsummationist Perspective,” *JETS* 42, no. 1 [March 1999], 54).

Second, a consistent literal hermeneutic does not deny or ignore the presence of figurative language in Scripture.³⁵ Instead, a literal hermeneutic attempts to interpret language as it was ordinarily employed in the original context in which the writer delivered his text. Bernard Ramm explains this well:

To interpret Scripture literally is not to be committed to a “wooden literalism,” nor to a “letterism,” nor to a neglect of the nuances that defy any “mechanical” understanding of language. Rather, it is to commit oneself to a starting point and that starting point is to understand a document the best one can in the context of the normal, usual, customary, traditional range of designation, which includes “tacit” understanding.³⁶

Martin Luther—in his debate with Desiderius Erasmus over the clarity of Scripture—articulated this same approach when he wrote, “we must everywhere stick to the simple, pure, and natural sense of the words that accords with the rules of grammar and the normal use of language as God has created it in man.”³⁷ In fact, it is a grammatical-historical hermeneutic which best preserves the power of figurative language. As David Turner states, “sensitivity to historical, grammatical, and cultural matters is the only way to arrive at the meaning intended by the figure.”³⁸

Certainly, the interpreter committed to consistent literal interpretation embraces the reality that figurative language is part of the capacity for communication that God has created in man. But he nonetheless recognizes that what makes figurative language powerful is that it represents a *departure* from the norm. Furthermore, the author of the text—and not the interpreter—is the only one with the authority to indicate when his language makes this departure, and he does so by leaving hints recognizable to his original audience.

In other words, literal interpretation emphasizes that the meaning of any text is synonymous with the author’s intent.³⁹ To decide when language should be treated

³⁵ It is noteworthy that one of the most extensive treatments ever written about figures of speech found in the Bible—E. W. Bullinger’s work, *Figures of Speech Used in the Bible: Explained and Illustrated*, first published in 1898—was written by a dispensational premillennialist.

³⁶ Bernard Ramm, *Protestant Biblical Interpretation*, 3rd rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1970), 121.

³⁷ Martin Luther, “On the Bondage of the Will,” in *Luther and Erasmus: Free Will and Salvation*, translated and edited by E. Gordon Rupp and Philip S Watson, LCC 17 (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster Press, 1969), 221. Luther emphasized this rule in response to the *quadrige* of literal, moral, allegorical, and analogical meanings espoused by the Roman Catholic Church. Nevertheless, Luther did not abandon his allegorical interpretation of texts like Revelation 20:1–6.

³⁸ David L. Turner, “The Continuity of Scripture and Eschatology,” *GTJ* 6, no. 2 (1985), 278. In the words of Bernard Ramm, “The literal meaning of the figurative expression is the proper or natural meaning as understood by students of language. Whenever a figure is used its literal meaning is precisely that meaning determined by grammatical studies of figures. Hence, figurative interpretation does not pertain to the spiritual or mystical sense of Scripture, but to the literal sense” (*Protestant Biblical Interpretation*, 121).

³⁹ As E. D. Hirsh stated, meaning is “that which is represented by a text; it is what the author meant by his use of a particular sign sequence; it is what the signs represent” (E. D. Hirsh, *Validity in Interpretation* [New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1967], 8). See also Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., “The Meaning

figuratively is not the prerogative of an interpreter apart from the author; nor does the mere content of a text automatically render it metaphorical, such as when texts are *prophetic* in nature—as if prophecy was always figurative in nature.⁴⁰ Whether language is used literally or figuratively is a decision made by the writer alone, and once he makes this decision, his intent becomes frozen in the text. Literal language cannot later become figurative; nor can figurative language morph into the literal at some subsequent point in time. It is the interpreter's responsibility simply to recognize what the writer intended to do with the words he chose. This commitment to consistent literal interpretation maintains a clear distinction between *appreciating figurative uses of language* and *interpreting figuratively*.⁴¹ Nineteenth-century Presbyterian pastor E. R. Craven sums this up well:

The *Literalist* (so called) is not one who denies that *figurative* language, that *symbols*, are used in prophecy, nor does he deny that great *spiritual* truths are set forth therein; his position is, simply, that the prophecies are to be *normally* interpreted (i.e., according to the received laws of language) as any other utterances are interpreted—that is manifestly literal being regarded as literal, that which is manifestly figurative being so regarded.⁴²

This understanding of “literal” has too often been ignored by non-dispensationists. Alva J. McClain expressed this frustration when he wrote, “This [literal, grammatico-historical] method, as its adherents have explained *times without number*, leaves room for all the devices and nuances of language, including the use of figure, metaphor, simile, symbol, and even allegory.”⁴³ Consequently, in the same way that it is incorrect for dispensationalists to charge that non-dispensationist systems proceed from an “allegorical” hermeneutic, so it is unacceptable for non-dispensationists to continue to describe the method of dispensationalism as “woodenly literal” or “literal extremism.” Misapplied or provocative labels always impede fruitful discussion.

Simply stated, a dispensational premillennialist consistently approaches the biblical text with the assumption that it must be first read literally, and its literal meaning

of Meaning,” in *Introduction to Biblical Hermeneutics: The Search for Meaning*, rev. ed., Walter C. Kaiser and Moisés Silva, eds. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007), 38–42.

⁴⁰ See Robert L. Thomas, “Genre Override in Revelation,” in *Evangelical Hermeneutics: The New Versus the Old* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2002), 323–48.

⁴¹ John Feinberg, “Systems of Discontinuity,” 74. Feinberg elsewhere states, “The claim that dispensationalists actually interpret figuratively on occasion is definitely erroneous. The error stems from neglecting to distinguish between figurative language (e.g., figures of speech) and interpreting figuratively” (John S. Feinberg, “Salvation in the Old Testament,” in *Tradition and Testament: Essays in Honor of Charles Lee Feinberg*, ed. John S. Feinberg and Paul D. Feinberg [Chicago: Moody Press, 1981], 47).

⁴² E. R. Craven, ed., “The Revelation of John,” in *Lange’s Commentary on the Holy Scriptures* (1874; repr., Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1968), 12:98.

⁴³ Alva J. McClain, *The Greatness of the Kingdom* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1968), 139; emphasis added.

must be accepted as *the* meaning unless it communicates an *absurdity*.⁴⁴ Again, this is not to deny the reality of figurative language in divine revelation. Rather, a consistently literal approach to interpretation, rightly employed, acknowledges that the biblical writer is in the seat of authority. He alone is the one who can determine the function and meaning of his words.⁴⁵

2. The Function of Progressive Revelation

The second key hermeneutical issue which affects every discussion about eschatology is *the view one takes regarding the function of progressive revelation*. Simply stated, progressive revelation refers to the manner by which God revealed his propositional, redemptive knowledge. God did not reveal this knowledge instantaneously, but *progressively*—through a process covering 1,500 years and including dozens of authors. It was a process which began with foundational truths and progressed to more specific details. But the later, more specific revelation never contradicts the earlier, more general revelation.

Proponents across the eschatological spectrum can affirm this basic understanding concerning the delivery of special revelation. The question, however, concerns the way in which one understands the relationship of subsequent revelation to antecedent revelation. Does subsequent revelation *merely expand and add to* the knowledge God previously revealed (like a house that is built from its foundation upwards and outwards), or does it *expand and alter* this knowledge in some way (like the metamorphosis exhibited by an insect as it moves from an immature form to a mature one)?

The issue comes down to what is called “testament priority.”⁴⁶ In other words, to understand a text of Scripture correctly, which “testament” serves as the starting

⁴⁴ Matt Waymeyer, “What about Revelation 20?” in *Christ’s Prophetic Plans: A Futuristic Premillennial Primer*, ed. John MacArthur and Richard Mayhue (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2012), 132. Waymeyer provides a helpful paradigm for recognizing the presence of figurative language: “To determine whether something in Scripture should be interpreted symbolically, it is helpful to ask three questions. First, *does it possess a degree of absurdity when taken literally?* With symbolic language, there is something inherent in the language itself that compels the interpreter to look beyond the literal meaning. . . . Second, *does it possess a degree of clarity when taken symbolically?* Symbolic language is essentially clear and understandable, vividly portraying what it symbolizes. . . . And third, *does it fall into an established category of symbolic language?* Because figures of speech are legitimate departures from the normal use of language, they are limited in number and can be defined in accordance with known examples.”

⁴⁵ As Benware argues, “when an interpreter leaves literal interpretation, he also leaves the guidelines and restraints of history and grammar. There is truth to the idea that when one spiritualizes the Scriptures the interpreter becomes the final authority instead of Scripture itself” (Paul N. Benware, *Understanding End Times Prophecy: A Comprehensive Approach* [Chicago: Moody Press, 1995], 109).

⁴⁶ Herbert Bateman defines “testament priority” as “a presuppositional preference of one testament over the other that determines person’s literal historical-grammatical hermeneutical starting point” (Herbert Bateman IV, “Dispensationalism Yesterday and Today,” in *Three Central Issues in Contemporary Dispensationalism: A Comparison of Traditional and Progressive Views*, ed. Herbert W. Bateman IV [Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1999], 38). But “preference” here must not be understood as an appreciation for the content of one testament over the other.

point? Must the interpreter read Scripture *forwards*, beginning first with the OT context and moving forward to the NT in order to understand God's redemptive plan accurately? Or does he read *backwards*, beginning with the NT and then reading the OT through the NT lens? The significance of this issue cannot be overstated. As Paul Feinberg acknowledged, "It is difficult to think of any problem that is more important or fundamental than the relationship between the Testaments."⁴⁷

For dispensational premillennialists, the starting point is the OT.⁴⁸ The OT text, beginning with the Pentateuch, is the starting point for the development of a truly biblical theology, for it provides the essential framework through which to understand everything that follows. The meaning of the OT has been fixed on the page by the inspired writer. Subsequent revelation never changes this meaning, though it adds to it and even applies it in ways not seen in its original context. As such, the NT is not required in order to understand what Isaiah meant in Isaiah 53, for example. The NT certainly describes the *fulfillment* of Isaiah 53 with specific details that Isaiah did not know, but it does not add to or alter the *meaning* Isaiah intended for his own words in that specific context. As stated by Michael Vlach, "Progressive revelation from the New Testament does not interpret the Old Testament passages in a way that cancels the original authorial intent of the Old Testament writers as determined by historical-grammatical hermeneutics."⁴⁹

Covenantalists counter this forwards-reading, OT-priority approach with two primary arguments.

Progressive Revelation and Old Testament Interpretation

First, covenantal theologians reject this forwards-reading approach by asserting that *the NT is given to interpret the OT correctly*. Covenantal premillennialist George Ladd explains the difference between the approaches this way:

Here is the basic watershed between a dispensational and a nondispensational theology. Dispensationalism forms its eschatology by a literal interpretation of the Old Testament and then fits the New Testament into it. A nondispensational eschatology forms its theology from the explicit teaching of the New Testament.⁵⁰

⁴⁷ Paul D. Feinberg, "Hermeneutics of Discontinuity," in *Continuity and Discontinuity*, 110. Or as Wayne House stated, "How the Old and New Testaments relate to one another is one of the central issues in biblical hermeneutics" (H. Wayne House, "The Hermeneutics of Historic Premillennialism and Jeremiah 31:31–34," unpublished paper, 1).

⁴⁸ As Ryrie states, "only dispensationalism does justice to the proper concept of the progress of revelation; [only it] can give a proper place to the idea of later development" (Charles Ryrie, "The Necessity of Dispensationalism," in *Vital Prophetic Issues*, ed. Roy B. Zuck [Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 1995], 152).

⁴⁹ Michael Vlach, "What is Dispensationalism?," in *Christ's Prophetic Plans: A Futuristic Premillennial Primer*, ed. John MacArthur and Richard Mayhue (Chicago: Moody Press, 2012), 24.

⁵⁰ George E. Ladd, "Historic Premillennialism," in *The Meaning of the Millennium*, 20–21.

For covenantalists, the only truly “Christian” way of understanding the Bible is to read from the NT *backwards*. In other words, the covenantal approach gives priority to the NT, which it sees as the necessary interpretive key for unlocking the full meaning of the OT text.⁵¹ True, an OT prophecy may have meant something concrete to its writer and original audience based on their historical context, and God would have held that original audience to the standard of the literal meaning of the text at that time. But God was not finished revealing his redemptive plan. Audiences subsequent to that original audience must therefore interpret that earlier revelation through the lens of subsequent revelation.⁵² If not, the OT text will inevitably be interpreted incorrectly. Postmillennialist Kenneth Gentry explains it this way: “*the Christian exegete must allow the New Testament to interpret the Old Testament. . . . This approach to biblical interpretation allows the conclusive revelation of God in the New Testament authoritatively to interpret incomplete revelation in the Old.*”⁵³ Kim Riddlebarger echoes this when he writes,

The historic Protestant (or the amillennial) position holds that the New Testament is the final arbiter of the Old Testament. We must interpret all Old Testament prophecy as do the writers of the New. We should place such prophecy in its redemptive-historical context if we are to interpret it correctly.⁵⁴

Or as Michael Lawrence writes,

In the case of prophecy, the shape of the story of the Bible as a whole is crucial. We need to remember that revelation is progressive, and in the revelation of Jesus Christ, we’ve been given both the main point and the end of the story. This means that we have an advantage over Old Testament readers. We work from the story of the whole Bible back to the prophecy, not the other way around. . . . Therefore the New Testament determines the ultimate meaning of Old Testament prophecy, not the other way around.⁵⁵

Conversely, the forwards-reading approach of the dispensationalist, who interprets the NT in light of the antecedent revelation of the OT, is considered guilty of

⁵¹ This approach takes the Reformation principle *Sacra Scriptura sui interpres* (“sacred Scripture is its own interpreter”) and limits the function of “interpretation” to the NT alone.

⁵² Sidney Greidanus states, “Since the literary context of the Old Testament is the New Testament, this means that the Old Testament must be understood in the context of the New Testament” (*Preaching Christ from the Old Testament: A Contemporary Hermeneutical Model* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999], 51). Cf. also Dennis E. Johnson, *Him We Proclaim: Preaching Christ from All the Scriptures* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2007), 160, n. 51.

⁵³ Gentry, *He Shall Have Dominion*, 156; emphasis in original. Gentry quotes VanGemeren, “Christian students of the Old Testament must pass by the cross of Jesus Christ on their return to the Old Testament, and as such they can never lose their identity as a Christian” (cf. Willem VanGemeren, *The Progress of Redemption: The Story of Salvation from Creation to New Jerusalem* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1988], 21).

⁵⁴ Riddlebarger, *A Case for Amillennialism*, 38.

⁵⁵ Michael Lawrence, *Biblical Theology in the Life of the Church* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2010), 49.

“nullifying progressive revelation,”⁵⁶ or worse, of reading the Bible as an old covenant Jew rather than a new covenant Christian.⁵⁷

The inevitable consequence of this backwards-reading approach is that the reader must see the meaning of the OT text as subject to *change*. While the OT text meant one thing to the writer and his original audience, its meaning for NT-era saints is different. Although proponents of NT priority avoid describing this change as “correction,” they nonetheless see it as “transformation.” As such, the word “progressive” in “progressive revelation” not only describes the general nature of God’s revelatory activity, but also describes what antecedent revelation undergoes as new revelation is given. As more revelation is given, the meaning of antecedent revelation undergoes “progression.”

For example, Peter Gentry and Stephen Wellum state that “many of the themes that were basic to the Old Testament have now been *transposed* and *transformed*.”⁵⁸ Beale states that “the NT storyline will be a *transformation* of the OT one in the light of how the NT is seen to be an unfolding of the OT.”⁵⁹ Referring to the modification in meaning that took place between the time OT promises were originally given to Israel and the way those promises are to be interpreted today, Ladd writes,

In principle it is quite possible that the prophecies addressed originally to literal Israel describing physical blessings have their fulfillment exclusively in the spiritual blessings enjoyed by the church. It is also possible that the Old Testament expectation of a kingdom on earth could be reinterpreted by the New Testament altogether of blessings in the spiritual realm.⁶⁰

To justify this understanding of *progression in the meaning of revelation*, proponents point to the Christ’s first advent as a paradigm-shifting event. Ladd explains, “The fact is that the New Testament frequently interprets Old Testament prophecies in a way *not suggested by the Old Testament context*. . . . *The Old Testament is reinterpreted* in light of the Christ event.”⁶¹ N. T. Wright states it this way, “Jesus spent His whole ministry redefining what the kingdom meant. He refused to give up the

⁵⁶ Millard J. Erickson, *A Basic Guide to Eschatology: Making Sense of the Millennium* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998), 106.

⁵⁷ Graeme Goldsworthy, *Preaching the Whole Bible as Christian Scripture: The Application of Biblical Theology to Expository Preaching* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 15–21.

⁵⁸ Peter J. Gentry and Stephen J. Wellum, *Kingdom through Covenant: A Biblical-Theological Understanding of the Covenants* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), 598; emphasis added.

⁵⁹ G. K. Beale, *A New Testament Biblical Theology: The Unfolding of the Old Testament in the New* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011), 6; emphasis added.

⁶⁰ George E. Ladd, “Revelation 20 and the Millennium,” *Review and Expositor* 57 (1960), 167. Ladd bases this assertion on Augustine’s hermeneutical rule: *Novum testamentum in vetere latet; vetus testamentum in novo patet*—“the New Testament is concealed in the Old; the Old Testament is revealed in the New” (ibid.).

⁶¹ Ladd, “Historic Premillennialism,” in *The Meaning of the Millennium*, 20–21; emphasis added.

symbolic language of the kingdom, but filled it with such a new content that, as we have seen, he powerfully subverted Jewish expectations.”⁶²

In short, it is argued that Christ's first advent forever changed the way in which the OT was to be read. The straight-forward promises in the OT concerning a land, a nation, a temple, etc., are now to be read metaphorically in a way that does not represent their original historical and grammatical context. The Christ event allows these OT promises to be fulfilled in a very different way that does not correspond to the way they were originally delivered.⁶³

Importantly, this debate over the function of progressive revelation relates closely to the previous issue of literal interpretation.⁶⁴ As stated above, it is not uncommon today for non-dispensationalists to argue that they are the ones who truly practice a “literal” method of interpretation. The primary basis for such an argument is the belief that the NT writers interpret prophetic portions of the OT in a non-literal fashion. Interpreting the NT writers *literally* then requires them to interpret OT writers *non-literally*, since this is what the NT writers themselves did.⁶⁵ The literal interpretation of the NT necessarily overrides the literal interpretation of OT texts, and imputes to those OT texts a new, non-literal or spiritualized meaning. Conversely, in order for dispensationalists to read the OT *literally*, it is argued that they must treat the NT *non-literally*, because they inevitably downplay or ignore the non-literal interpretive approach established by the NT writers in their reading of the OT.⁶⁶

Progressive Revelation and Old Testament Perpetuity

The second challenge brought against the forwards-reading approach of dispensationalists is through the claim that *a truth revealed in the OT does not necessarily maintain authority if the NT does not explicitly validate that truth*. Consider again these words of Ladd:

⁶² N. T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress Press, 1996), 471.

⁶³ Graeme Goldsworthy states emphatically, “It follows that the first coming of Christ fulfilled all, I repeat, *all* the promises and prophecies of the Old Testament since these all deal in some way or other with the restoration of reality” (“Biblical Theology and Hermeneutics,” *SBJT* 10, no. 2 [Summer 2006], 15).

⁶⁴ House states, “At the core of these issues is the interpretive relationship between the Testaments. Both views claim to employ a literal interpretation, and interpreters in both premillennial camps work hard at understanding the historical, grammatical issues inherent in rightly understanding the Scriptures. But the interpreters look at the timeline of progressive revelation from different ends” (Wayne House, “The Hermeneutics of Historic Premillennialism,” 2).

⁶⁵ Poythress, *Understanding Dispensationalists*, 68–70; cf. Robert Saucy, “The Crucial Issue between Dispensational and Nondispensational Systems,” *Criswell Theological Review* 1 (1986), 155. As Riddlebarger argues, “If the New Testament writers spiritualize Old Testament prophecies by applying them in a nonliteral sense, then the Old Testament passage must be seen in light of that New Testament interpretation, not vice versa” (*A Case for Amillennialism*, 37).

⁶⁶ For a robust challenge to the presupposition that the NT writers interpret the OT non-literally, see Abner Chou, *The Hermeneutics of the Biblical Writers: Learning to Interpret Scripture from the Prophets and Apostles* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2018).

Here is the basic watershed between a dispensational and a nondispensational theology. Dispensationalism forms its eschatology by a literal interpretation of the Old Testament and then fits the New Testament into it. A nondispensational eschatology forms its theology from the explicit teaching of the New Testament.⁶⁷

The last sentence of Ladd's explanation—and especially his use of the adjective “explicit”—is crucial. Because of his view of NT priority, Ladd allows only “explicit teaching of the NT” to contribute to the formation of his eschatology. Explicit teaching of the OT is not permitted to fulfill this function. Later he states it again plainly: “a millennial doctrine cannot be based on Old Testament prophecies but should be based on the New Testament alone.”⁶⁸

Certainly, how a truth measures up to “explicit teaching” is open to interpretation. But in essence, Ladd and other covenantalists assert that the NT has *ultimate veto power* over the OT.⁶⁹ It exercises this power not only *by direct nullification* (such as its setting aside of the applicability of the Mosaic Law; e.g., Gal 5:18)—a fact upon which dispensationalists and non-dispensationalists agree—but also *by mere silence*. In other words, whatever the NT does not explicitly restate from a literal interpretation of the OT it essentially invalidates, at least at it applies to eschatology.

Proponents support this assertion through appeal to a dualistic view of redemptive history. Old Testament revelation was predominantly *earthly and provisional* in nature, accommodated to the primitive materialism of OT Israel. New Testament revelation, on the other hand, speaks of that which is *spiritual and eternal*. It provides a more advanced understanding of reality based on what God accomplished through the Christ event. Consequently, only the NT can speak with clarity and authority regarding the lofty things of the future.

Operating from this viewpoint, Ladd concludes that “The Israel which will experience salvation is the ‘church’ rather than the nation, the spiritual rather than the physical Israel. The national and physical elements are not sloughed off, but they are subordinated to the spiritual factors.”⁷⁰ Bruce Waltke echoes this basic sentiment:

With the transformation of Christ's body from an earthly physical body to a heavenly spiritual body, and with his ascension from the earthly realism to the heavenly Jerusalem with its heavenly throne and the outpouring of his Holy Spirit, the earthly material symbols were done away and the spiritual reality portrayed by the symbols superseded the shadows. Consequently, OT prophecies about Israel's future kingdom that pertain to the church again, which began at Pentecost, find a spiritual fulfillment.⁷¹

⁶⁷ Ladd, “Historic Premillennialism,” 20–21.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 32.

⁶⁹ Cf. Mike Stallard, “Literal Interpretation, Theological Method, and the Essence of Dispensationalism,” *Journal of Ministry and Theology* 1, no. 1 (Spring 1997), 31.

⁷⁰ George E. Ladd, *The Presence of the Future*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974), 74.

⁷¹ Bruce K. Waltke, “Kingdom Promises as Spiritual,” in *Continuity and Discontinuity*, 282.

Reaffirming a Forwards-Reading Approach to Progressive Revelation

Several dangerous consequences must be observed in response to the assertion of NT priority. First, what is at stake is our understanding of *the OT as revelation*. The backwards-reading, NT-priority approach places limitations on our understanding of the OT as a fully authoritative and fundamentally clear Word of God.⁷² What is called *NT priority* in principle becomes *NT exclusivity* in practice, since only that which is explicitly stated in the NT is deemed authoritative or clear enough to inform our theology. This creates a bifurcation, whereby OT revelation—at least as it appears at face value—is treated as inferior, and NT revelation as inherently superior. This plays directly into the hands of those who already dismiss the language of the OT as divine “accommodation.”

Challenging the presupposition that the NT must explicitly repeat OT teaching if that OT teaching is to contribute to Christian theology, S. Lewis Johnson writes,

There is no need to repeat what is copiously spread over the pages of the Scriptures. There seems to be lurking behind the demand a false principle, namely, that we should not give heed to the OT unless its content is repeated in the New. The correct principle, however, is that we should not consider invalid and worthy of discard any of the OT unless we are specifically told to do so in the New, as in the case of the Law of Moses.⁷³

Moreover, in pondering the consequences of reading the NT back into the OT, Paul Feinberg asks: “How can the integrity of the OT text be maintained? In what sense can the OT really be called a *revelation* in its original meaning? Similar objections can be made to any approach which advocates a subsequent or consequent meaning ascribed by the NT.”⁷⁴ Or as Turner states, “If NT reinterpretation reverses, cancels,

⁷² An example of the challenge the NT-priority approach issues to the clarity of OT revelation is found in the words of E. J. Young: “Since the revelation granted to the prophets was less clear than that given to Moses; indeed, since it contained elements of obscurity, we must take these facts into consideration when interpreting prophecy. We must therefore abandon once and for all the erroneous and non-Scriptural rule of ‘literal if possible.’ The prophetic language belonged to the Mosaic economy and hence, was typical. Only in the light of the New Testament fulfillment can it properly be interpreted” (Edward J. Young, *My Servants the Prophets* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 1952], 215 n. 21).

⁷³ S. Lewis Johnson, Jr., “Evidence from Romans 9–11,” in *A Case for Premillennialism: A New Consensus*, ed. Donald K. Campbell and Jeffery L. Townsend (Chicago: Moody Press, 1992), 223. Similarly, Robert Thomas writes, “Single revelations of divine truth without elaborations must be allowed” (Robert L. Thomas, “A Hermeneutical Ambiguity of Eschatology: The Analogy of Faith,” *JETS* 23, no. 1 [March, 1980], 45). John Feinberg also states, “If the NT explicitly rejects an OT institution, etc., 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. . . . To argue that it is canceled because it is not repeated is a classic case of arguing from silence” (“Systems of Discontinuity,” in *Continuity and Discontinuity*, 76).

⁷⁴ John Feinberg, “Hermeneutics of Discontinuity,” in *Continuity and Discontinuity*, 116.

or seriously modifies OT promises to Israel, one wonders how to define the word ‘progressive.’ God’s faithfulness to his promises to Israel must also be explained.”⁷⁵

Second, what is at stake is our understanding of *revelation in general*. If the NT reinterprets the OT text, sometimes even “radically” as some covenantal theologians claim,⁷⁶ one is forced either to believe that significant portions of God’s verbal revelation contain hidden meanings not accessible by the original author and his audience (*sensus plenior*), or you have to believe that the meaning of revelation can actually *mutate* over time. What a given revelation *meant* to its original audience is no longer what it *means* today. Progressive dispensationalist Darrel Bock admits this when he writes,

Does the expansion of meaning entail a change of meaning? This is an important question for those concerned about consistency within interpretation. . . . The answer is both yes and no. On the one hand, to add to the revelation of a promise is to introduce “change” to it through addition. But that is precisely how revelation progresses, as referents are added to the scope of a previously given promise.⁷⁷

In varying degrees covenantal theologians press this even farther, arguing that such change not only entails *addition* to the meaning of specific texts, but complete *alteration*. Thus, promises given to national Israel in the OT no longer have national Israel in view at all. These promises now are to be understood as directed at and fulfilled in the church exclusively. In other words, today’s readers of the OT are to understand its promises in ways that the OT prophets themselves never intended or envisioned.⁷⁸

Walvoord recognized the challenge this presents to one’s understanding of the nature of revelation, and why a dispensational approach avoids the credibility problem of believing in meaning that mutates: “The issue . . . is whether progressive revelation ever reverses preceding revelation and denies its validity. It is on the basis of consistency of fulfillment of prophecy historically that premillenarians project a consistent literal fulfillment of prophecy in the future.”⁷⁹ Similarly, Robert Thomas writes,

⁷⁵ Turner, “The Continuity of Scripture and Eschatology,” 281.

⁷⁶ E.g., George Eldon Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 373.

⁷⁷ Darrell L. Bock, “Current Messianic Activity and OT Davidic Promise: Dispensationalism, Hermeneutics, and NT Fulfillment,” *TrinJ* 15, no. 1 (1994), 71. Bock here blurs the line between “sense” and “referent.”

⁷⁸ E.g., Waltke argues for “the hard fact that national Israel and its law have been permanently replaced by the church and the New Covenant,” and that “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” (“Kingdom Promises as Spiritual,” in *Continuity and Discontinuity*, 274–75).

⁷⁹ John F. Walvoord, “Does the Church Fulfill Israel’s Program? (Part 1)” *BSac* 137 (January 1980), 29.

Progress in divine revelation is quite apparent in tracing through the books of the Old and New Testaments chronologically, but “progress” in the sense only of adding to what has already been revealed, not in any sense of a change of previous revelation. To change the substance of something already written is not “progress”; it is an “alteration” or “change” that raises questions about the credibility of the text’s original meaning.⁸⁰

Ultimately, the summary of the relationship of the NT to the OT provided by Michael Vlach best preserves a consistent hermeneutic as well as a consistent view of revelation in general:

The NT *continues* the storyline of the OT prophets in a literal and straightforward manner. No transforming or transcending of the Bible’s storyline is necessary. God does not reinterpret His previous inspired revelation. Nor is there a reality shift from OT expectation to NT fulfillment. NT fulfillment is consistent with the original message and intent of the OT writers.⁸¹

This understanding of progress in revelation best upholds the clarity, authority, and immutability of *all* of God’s Word—not just the NT.⁸²

3. The Influence of Theological Presuppositions

The third key hermeneutical issue which affects discussions about eschatology is *the view one takes regarding the influence of theological presuppositions*. Under consideration here is not whether interpreters have such presuppositions. Rather, the issue under question is whether these presuppositions are recognized, and whether these presuppositions are of the nature that they facilitate faithful *exegesis*, or whether they inevitably contribute to *eisegesis*.⁸³ Stated another way, is one’s interpretation

⁸⁰ Thomas, “The Hermeneutics of Progressive Dispensationalism,” 90 n. 47. William Barrick also states, “It is an inherent contradiction to declare that Scripture (in the NT) conveys a meaning not intended by Scripture (in the OT). However, that is exactly the dilemma faced by a hermeneutic that assumes NT priority over the OT” (William D. Barrick, “New Covenant Theology and the Old Testament Covenants,” *MSJ* 18, no. 1 (Fall 2007), 167).

⁸¹ Michael J. Vlach, *He Will Reign Forever: A Biblical Theology of the Kingdom of God* (Silverton, OR: Lampion Press, 2017). Or consider Ryrie’s simple but helpful definition of progressive revelation: “new revelation cannot mean contradictory revelation. Later revelation on a subject does not make the earlier revelation mean something different” (Ryrie, *Dispensationalism Today*, 94).

⁸² As noted above, opponents to this understanding of progressive revelation point to supposed non-literal “fulfillments” of OT promises cited by NT writers. It is not within the scope of this article to analyze the meaning of πληρώω (*plēroō*, “to fulfill”) in the NT when used together with OT citations. But it must be noted here that it is too simplistic to interpret the term as referring always to final fulfillment. Paul Feinberg summarizes the issue succinctly: “The relationship between the OT and the NT is more complex than OT prediction and NT fulfillment” (“Hermeneutics of Discontinuity,” 122). For a helpful list of the different ways the NT writers use OT citations, see Roy B. Zuck, *Basic Bible Interpretation: A Practical Guide to Discovering Biblical Truth* (Colorado Springs, CO: David C. Cook, 1991), 260–70.

⁸³ The word *exegesis* is derived from the Greek verb ἐξηγήομαι (*eksēgeomai*), a compound of the Greek preposition ἐκ (*ek*, “out of”) and the verb ἡγήομαι (*ēgeomai*, “to lead, guide”). “Exegesis,” therefore,

to be driven by a predetermined eschatology (deductive reasoning), or is one's eschatology to be driven by a predetermined hermeneutic (inductive reasoning)?

Though certainly not without inconsistencies and failures, dispensational premillennialism—based on its commitment to a consistent, literal hermeneutic—is most openly devoted to the pursuit of an inductive study of Scripture that attempts to limit the role of presuppositions to the area of interpretive methodology, rather than allow it to determine the meaning of texts. In the words of Richard Mayhue, “Dispensational theology is merely a descriptive term applied to the scheme of theology which is inductively systematized from the Bible.”⁸⁴ It is the result of an approach that “comes to the text with no other preunderstanding than a consistent grammatical-historical hermeneutic that is employed consistently throughout the Scriptures in all realms of theology.”⁸⁵ Warning against the deductive approach, Mayhue states that “it is enticing, but wrong, to form one's theology apart from a complete inductive study of Scripture. It is wrong, having done this, to start looking for biblical texts that seem to support our conclusions, all without carefully interpreting the text to which we appeal.”⁸⁶

Certainly, dispensationalists are not innocent of imposing theological preunderstandings on the biblical text—a fact Mayhue and many others acknowledge.⁸⁷ Yet its commitment to form eschatological convictions from an inductive approach distinguishes it adequately from covenantalism. The words of covenant theologian J. I. Packer illustrate this well. In response to the question, “What is covenant theology?” Packer openly admits that

The straightforward, if provocative answer to that question is that it is what is nowadays called a hermeneutic—that is, a way of reading the whole Bible that is itself part of the overall interpretation of the Bible that undergirds it. A successful hermeneutic is a consistent interpretive procedure yielding a consistent understanding of Scripture that in turn confirms the propriety of the procedure itself. . . . Once Christians have got this far, covenant theology of the Scriptures

is the leading of meaning *out* of a text. It implies that the meaning of a text has been placed in it by the author, and the interpreter's job in exegesis is to discover it. The word *eisegesis* comes from the Greek verb *εισηγεομαι* (*eisēgeomai*), a compound of the Greek preposition *εις* (*eis*, “into”) and the verb *ēgeomai* (*ἡγεομαι*, “to lead, guide”). “Eisegesis,” therefore is the leading of meaning *into* a text. It implies that the interpreter comes to the text with a predetermined meaning in mind and finds a way to insert it into the author's words.

⁸⁴ Richard L. Mayhue, “The Bible's Watchword: Day of the Lord,” *MSJ* 22, no. 1 (Spring 2011), 88.

⁸⁵ Mayhue, “Why Futuristic Premillennialism,” in *Christ's Prophetic Plans*, 66.

⁸⁶ Richard L. Mayhue, *How to Study the Bible* (Fearn, Ross-shire: Christian Focus, 2009), 87.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 115, 173–75, etc. Mayhue writes, “As a mild dispensationalist, I take this warning to heart. We should never let the dispensational system unwarrantedly color our interpretation of individual Scripture texts” (*ibid.*, 175).

is something they can hardly miss.⁸⁸

In other words, Packer's covenantal presupposition serves as his hermeneutic for interpreting biblical texts, naturally making covenant theology "hard to miss" when he reads Scripture. This illustrates how theological preunderstanding is both acknowledged and enthusiastically employed.

While the scope of the discussion concerning the influence of presuppositions is vast, two particular issues related to eschatology merit attention here.⁸⁹

Theological Presupposition and the Analogy of Faith

First, the influence of presuppositions on eschatological discussions comes to the forefront in the debate over *the definition and application of the analogy of faith*. According to its most basic definition, the analogy of faith refers to the "general harmony of fundamental doctrine that pervades the entire Scriptures."⁹⁰ Since Scripture has one ultimate author who communicated his intent successfully through specially-prepared human writers, there are no contradictions between the parts that comprise the whole. No passage—when correctly understood—will contradict what is taught by another.⁹¹

As simple as this rule sounds, there is disagreement over how this rule applies in the exegetical process.⁹² Rather than employing the analogy of faith as a *preventative* check at the end of the exegetical process (one designed to preclude the acceptance of contradictory interpretations), it is often used as a *prescriptive* tool introduced at the beginning of interpretation. Theology formed from other, "similar texts" is used as a grid through which to interpret a given text—the implicit expectation

⁸⁸ J. I. Packer, *Revelations of the Cross* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1998), 9–10. See also his "Introduction" to *The Economy of the Covenants Between God and Man: Comprehending a Complete Body of Divinity*, by Herman Witsius (1677; reprint, Escondido, CA: den Dulk Christian Foundation, 1990), 1:7.

⁸⁹ For a broader treatment of the issues involved, see Robert L. Thomas, "The Origin of Preunderstanding: From Explanation to Obfuscation," in *Evangelical Hermeneutics: The New Versus the Old* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2002), 41–62.

⁹⁰ Milton S. Terry, *Biblical Hermeneutics: A Treatise on the Interpretation of the Old and New Testaments* (New York: Phillips & Hunt, 1885), 579.

⁹¹ The phrase "analogy of faith" (Lat., *analogia fidei*) is taken from Romans 12:6, "Since we have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, each of us is to exercise them accordingly; if prophecy, according to *the proportion of his faith*" (emphasis added). The phrase "the proportion of his faith" (τὴν ἀναλογίαν τῆς πίστεως) could also be translated as "the analogy of the faith"—with "the faith" referring to the standard of apostolic doctrine. According to this rendering, Paul stipulates that those with the gift of prophecy must exercise it in agreement with apostolic teaching if it is to be received as prophecy. Thus, with respect to the interpretation of Scripture, the *analogy of faith*—or better, the analogy of *the faith*—requires that an interpretation be accepted if it is harmonious with the standard of apostolic teaching.

⁹² As Walter Kaiser noted, "Few theological concepts have been more confusing and without clear development in the history of the church than this concept" (Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., "Hermeneutics and the Theological Task," *TrinJ* 12, no. 1 [Spring, 1991], 4).

being that the text under consideration must not only harmonize with but also reaffirm the theology derived elsewhere. The result is a deductive approach to interpretation which looks suspiciously on single revelations of divine truth.⁹³

Several statements from non-dispensationalists regarding this expanded use of the analogy of faith illustrate its impact on the formation of eschatological convictions. For example, Riddlebarger's definition of the analogy of faith is representative of many covenant theologians. Referring to the analogy of faith, he writes, "This refers to the importance of interpreting an unclear biblical text in light of clear passages which speak to the same subject rather than taking the literal sense in isolation from the rest of Scripture."⁹⁴ In other words, a given text can be interpreted literally if it reaffirms what has been gleaned from "clearer" texts in the rest of Scripture. Consequently, if a literal interpretation does not reaffirm what is considered "clear" elsewhere, a different interpretive method is to be considered for the text at hand. This finds direct expression in Louis Berkhof's treatment of Revelation 20:

When a doctrine is supported by an obscure passage of Scripture only and finds no support in the analogy of the faith, it can only be accepted with great reserve. Possibly, to say probably, the passage requires a different interpretation than the one put on it. Cf. Rev. 20:1–4.⁹⁵

In other words, because Revelation 20:1–4 finds no parallel elsewhere in Scripture, Ladd uses the analogy of faith to dismiss its literal interpretation. A single revelation of truth—the "one thousand years" repeated numerous times in Revelation 20:1–6—does not fare well with this application of the analogy of faith.

This prescriptive function of the analogy of faith evidences itself in various systems alien to an inductive approach to the Bible.⁹⁶ For example, proponents of the *canonical approach* to Scripture insist that the theology of all of Scripture is necessary for the correct interpretation of any of its parts.⁹⁷ This naturally assumes a NT priority position. Those who espouse *theological interpretation* expand the boundaries of the analogy of faith even beyond Scripture to include ecclesiastic creeds and

⁹³ Thomas, "A Hermeneutical Ambiguity of Eschatology," 45.

⁹⁴ Riddlebarger, *A Case for Amillennialism*, 37.

⁹⁵ Louis Berkhof, *Principles of Biblical Interpretation: Sacred Hermeneutics* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1950), 166.

⁹⁶ This is not to say that dispensationalists have not been guilty of employing their own "analogy of faith" in the interpretation of Scripture—an interpretive grid which guarantees that they will extract their particular views from the biblical text. By and large, however, dispensationalists have been much more vocal in their commitment to pursue an inductive approach to Scripture.

⁹⁷ Waltke writes, "By the canonical process approach I mean the recognition that the text's intention became deeper and clearer as the parameters of the canon were expanded. Just as redemption itself has a progressive history, so also older texts in the canon underwent a correlative progressive perception of meaning as they became part of a growing canonical literature" (Bruce K. Waltke, "A Canonical Process Approach to the Psalms," in *Tradition and Testament: Essays in Honor of Charles Lee Feinberg*, ed. John S. Feinberg and Paul D. Feinberg [Chicago: Moody Press, 1981], 7).

confessions.⁹⁸ Certain expressions of the *biblical theology* movement also include the dogma of theological systems, confessional traditions, or a preferred redemptive storyline as part of the analogy of faith.⁹⁹

What characterizes all these approaches is the willingness, under the aegis of the analogy of faith, to interpret Scripture deductively—to preunderstand the text. In the best of cases it results in sound theology being imported into texts which actually speak about other issues.¹⁰⁰ At the very worst of cases it results in the insertion of human opinions into the Word of God. Ultimately, while abuses of the analogy of faith can be observed in all areas of biblical study, they are more common in the exegesis of prophetic texts than elsewhere.¹⁰¹

Theological Presupposition and Platonic Dualism

A second issue related to presuppositions and its impact on eschatology is more philosophical in nature. It concerns *the influence Platonic dualism has had on Christians' understanding of God's purposes in redemption*.¹⁰²

Established by the Greek philosopher Plato (428–347 BC), Platonism espouses a dualistic worldview which considers material things as inherently inferior to the non-material realm. Things belonging to the world of the physical and concrete are considered “imperfect copies of transcendent, objective and eternal ‘forms.’”¹⁰³ R. C. Sproul summarizes Plato’s worldview as follows:

⁹⁸ One commentary series which employs this approach to Scripture describes its methodology as follows: “This series of biblical commentaries was born out of the conviction that dogma clarifies rather than obscures. Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible advances on the assumption that the Nicene tradition, in all its diversity and controversy, provides the proper basis for the interpretation of the Bible as Christian Scripture. . . . Doctrine, then, is not a moldering scrim of antique prejudice obscuring the meaning of the Bible. It is a crucial aspect of the divine pedagogy, a clarifying agent for our minds fogged by self-deceptions, a challenge to our languid intellectual apathy that will too often rest in false truisms and the easy spiritual nostrums of the present age rather than search more deeply and widely for the dispersed keys to the many doors of Scripture” (R. R. Reno, “Series Preface,” in Jaroslav Pelikan, *Acts*, Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible [Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2005], 13–14).

⁹⁹ Goldsworthy has this application in mind when he states, “Biblical theology involves us in a *dialogue between* our exegesis and our dogmatic formulations” (“Biblical Theology and Hermeneutics,” 16; emphasis added). In other words, there is not a one-way street that travels from exegesis to systematic theology. Rather exegesis informs one’s systematic theology as much as one’s systematic theology informs his exegesis.

¹⁰⁰ As Kaiser states, this occurs when the Bible is “‘leveled out,’ resulting in the fact that whenever the Bible spoke on any subject, it said everything that the latest revelation included, since in this sense ‘Scripture interpreted Scripture’” (“Hermeneutics and the Theological Task,” 9).

¹⁰¹ Thomas, “A Hermeneutical Ambiguity of Eschatology,” 46.

¹⁰² For a helpful treatment on this issue, see Michael J. Vlach’s unpublished paper, “Platonism’s Influence on Christian Eschatology.”

¹⁰³ “Platonism,” in *Pocket Dictionary of Theological Terms*, ed. Stanley J. Grenz, David Guretzki, and Cherith Fee Nordling (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1999), 91.

Plato saw people living in two different worlds: the world of ideas and the world of physical objects. He called material objects “receptacles”—things that receive or contain something else. The physical object contains its idea or form. The form is distinguished from the object. The form causes the essence of a thing. In this sense a material object participates in or imitates its ideal form. But it is at best a copy of the ideal form, and an imperfect copy at that.

This concept of the relationship between form and matter, idea and receptacle, lies at the heart of the Greek view of the inherent imperfection of all things material, which led inevitably to the denigration of physical things. This negative view of physical reality influenced many Christian theologies.¹⁰⁴

As Sproul points out, the impact of Plato’s dualism on Christian thought has been significant. Gary Habermas also points to this when he writes,

Christian thought also came under the influence of Platonism, as scholars of the third century such as Clement of Alexandria and Origen mixed this Greek philosophy with their theology. In particular, Augustine’s interpretation of Plato dominated Christian thought for the next thousand years after his death in the fifth century.¹⁰⁵

This dualistic preunderstanding asserts itself particularly in the study of the Bible’s teaching concerning future things. Not surprisingly, if the material world is viewed as inherently imperfect and the spiritual world as infinitely superior, the belief that the Messiah will set up an earthly kingdom upon his return—a kingdom with a physical throne in the earthly city of Jerusalem, ruling over the nations of this material world—is to be considered “crass materialism.”¹⁰⁶ Prophecies of the future cannot possibly refer to realities in this present world. Instead, God’s plan of redemption has moved from a material focus (the nation of Israel, land, and a physical temple) to a spiritual focus (heaven). Correspondingly, the essence of biblical interpretation moves from the concrete (literal) to the abstract (allegorical or spiritualized), or from type to antitype.

The impact of this dualism can be observed in premillennialism’s fall out of popularity in the early church. Pointing to the growth of Platonism on the early church Fathers, Craig Blaising states that,

Ancient Christian premillennialism weakened to the point of disappearance when the spiritual vision model of eternity became dominant in the church. A

¹⁰⁴ R. C. Sproul, *The Consequence of Ideas: Understanding the Concepts that Shaped Our World* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2000), 36.

¹⁰⁵ Gary R. Habermas, “Plato, Platonism,” in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, ed. Walter A. Elwell (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2001), 929.

¹⁰⁶ Cox, *Amillennialism Today*, 67; cf. also Riddlebarger, *A Case for Amillennialism*, 110.

future kingdom on earth simply did not fit well in an eschatology that stressed personal ascent to a spiritual realm.¹⁰⁷

Even amillennialists agree. William Masselink states, “The Gnostic [dualistic] philosophy of this period and the Alexandrian school with its allegorical interpretations of the scripture were . . . a great detriment to the progress of Chiliasm.”¹⁰⁸

Evidence of this dualism can thus be found in Augustine (AD 354–430), generally considered to be the father of amillennialism. In his famous theological treatise, *The City of God*, he explains the “kingdom” of Revelation 20 as follows:

And this opinion [of a physical millennial kingdom after the first resurrection] would not be objectionable, if it were believed that the joys of the saints in that Sabbath *shall be spiritual*, and consequent on the presence of God; for I myself, too, once held this opinion. But, as they assert that those who then rise again shall enjoy the leisure of immoderate carnal banquets, furnished with an amount of meat and drink such as not only to shock the feeling of the temperate, but even to surpass the measure of credulity itself, such assertions can be believed only by the carnal. They who do believe them are called by the spiritual Chiliasm, which we may literally reproduce by the name Millenarians.¹⁰⁹

In summarizing Augustine’s view, Benedict Viviano writes,

Augustine was attracted to the spiritual interpretation of the kingdom we have already seen in Origen. Indeed, ultimately for Augustine, the kingdom of God consists in eternal life with God in heaven. That is the *civitas dei*, the city of God, as opposed to the *civitas terrena*.¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁷ Craig A. Blasing, “Premillennialism” in *Three Views on the Millennium and Beyond*, ed. Darrell L. Bock (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1999), 170. Benware echoes this same conclusion when he writes, “Origen (AD 185–254) and other scholars in Alexandria were greatly influenced by Greek philosophy and attempted to integrate that philosophy with Christian theology. Included in Greek philosophy was the idea that those things that were material and physical were inherently evil. Influenced by this thinking, these Alexandrian scholars concluded that an earthly kingdom of Christ with its many physical blessings would be something evil” (*Understanding End Times Prophecy*, 119).

¹⁰⁸ William Masselink, *Why Thousand Years?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1930), 27, cited in Nathan Busenitz, “Did the Early Church Believe in a Literal Millennial Kingdom,” in *Christ’s Prophetic Plans*, 187.

¹⁰⁹ Augustine, *The City of God*, vol. 2, trans. Marcus Dods (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1871), 356–57. Augustine acknowledges in this statement that he had previously held a premillennial view, but abandoned it because of the extreme materialism advocated by other premillennialists (cf. David McKay, “Augustine on Revelation 20: A Root of Amillennialism,” *Foundations* 60 (Autumn 2013), 59–60. Augustine’s response demonstrates that what is needed is not an “either/or” dualism with respect to the Messiah’s kingdom (either material or spiritual) but a “both/and” (both material and spiritual).

¹¹⁰ Benedict T. Viviano, *The Kingdom of God in History* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 1988), 52–23; cf. also Howard A. Snyder, *Models of the Kingdom* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 1991), 54.

Similarly, Calvin—who was significantly impacted by Augustine’s view of human history—commented as follows in response to the eschatological blessings promised in Joel 3:18–19:

But we must remember that when the Prophets so splendidly extol the blessings of God, they intend not to fill the minds of the godly with thoughts about eating and drinking; but profane men lay hold on such passages as though the Lord intended to gratify their appetite. We know, indeed, that God’s children differ much from swine: hence God fills not the faithful with earthly things, for this would not be useful for their salvation.¹¹¹

This dualism is perpetuated in more recent times by assertions like that of covenant premillennialist George Ladd, who boldly stated, “Jesus did not offer to the Jews the earthly kingdom any more than he offered himself to them as their glorious earthly king. Here we may take our stand on firm ground.”¹¹² In the same kind of absolute language, Francis Andersen states,

The prophets who give warning of threatened deportation from Palestine also hold out hopes of redemption by restoration to the promised land. *But in the New Testament such a matter is wholly spiritualized*; the land of promise is “a better heavenly city” (Heb 11:10, 16), a thought in line with Paul’s teaching that Sarah, as the mother of us all, is “Jerusalem which is above” (Gal 4:26). The promised rest continues to remain, then, to the people of God and those who believe in Jesus enter into it (Heb 4).¹¹³

Or consider the words of Waltke, who states that “in the NT, in contrast to the expectation of Judaism, the kingdom’s character is ‘heavenly’ and ‘spiritual,’ not ‘earthly’ and ‘political.’”¹¹⁴

Without question, it would be unwarranted to characterize all covenantalists as having an eschatology influenced by Platonic dualism. It would also be incorrect to suggest that dispensationalists have not been influenced by movements and worldviews incongruent with God’s Word. The purpose instead is to highlight the fact that philosophical preunderstandings are often unwittingly allowed to influence biblical interpretation. This is especially the case with eschatology, and especially the case with respect to the understanding of the theme of the “kingdom.” One’s pre-suppositions concerning the material and immaterial worlds have an immense impact on the hermeneutics one chooses to interpret prophetic texts (literal vs. spiritualized;

¹¹¹ John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Twelve Minor Prophets*, vol. 2, *Joel, Amos, Obadiah* (Edinburgh: Calvin Translation Society, 1846), 138–39.

¹¹² George E. Ladd, *Crucial Questions about the Kingdom of God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1952), 113.

¹¹³ Francis Andersen, “The Scope of the Abrahamic Covenant,” *Churchman* 74, no. 4 (1960): 243–44; emphasis added.

¹¹⁴ Waltke, “Kingdom Promises as Spiritual,” 270; cf. also Bruce K. Waltke with Charles Yu, *An Old Testament Theology: An Exegetical, Canonical, and Thematic Approach* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007), 560.

reading the text at face-value, or reading it through a process of abstraction), and ultimately, on one's interpretive conclusions concerning God's redemptive purposes (whether it is both earthly and spiritual in nature). More attention needs to be devoted to recognizing and assessing this influence, particularly as it relates those who claim Augustine as their champion.

Reaffirming the Pursuit of Interpretive Objectivity

If there is to be progress made in discussions over eschatological differences it must arise out of renewed commitment to pursue interpretive objectivity. This commitment includes not only the recognition the presuppositions impacting our reading of the pertinent texts, but the commitment to assess these presuppositions and the validity of their influence on the process of interpretation. Several challenges are noteworthy in light of the discussion above.

First, if there is to be any hope of hearing the text clearly, *the analogy of faith must be employed as a preventative check rather than a prescriptive mechanism*. In describing this way of understanding the role of the analogy of faith, Thomas writes,

Its value would thereby become of a negative type: Is there any reason why the meaning of the text reached by a more restricted exegesis cannot be accepted? Or, is there any reason why this interpretation cannot be harmonized with previous impressions as to the unified teaching of Scripture? This has much advantage over the approach that asks, "How can I find this meaning in my text?"¹¹⁵

Kaiser advocates a similar view:

After we have finished our exegetical work of establishing what, indeed, the author of the paragraph or text under consideration was trying to say, *then* we must go on to set this teaching in its total Biblical context by way of gathering together what God has continued to say on the topic. We should then compare this material with our findings concerning the passage being investigated. But mind this point well: canonical context must appear only as part of our summation and not as part of our exegesis.¹¹⁶

If the analogy of faith is employed otherwise, the possibility for progress in eschatological disagreements disappears into the mist of circular reasoning.¹¹⁷ Kaiser notes this when he asks,

¹¹⁵ Thomas, "A Hermeneutical Ambiguity of Eschatology," 53.

¹¹⁶ Kaiser, *Towards an Exegetical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1998), 83.

¹¹⁷ As finite creatures we cannot avoid circular reasoning. We must presuppose a first principle—a fundamental starting point which we accept on its own account. There is a difference, however, between virtuous circular reasoning and vicious circular reasoning. Virtuous circular reasoning, in this case, presupposes the *nature* of the biblical text—that it is necessary, inspired, inerrant, clear, authoritative, and

Whose analogy of faith will be used? Calvinists surely have an analogy of faith that is different from Arminians; dispensationalists from covenantal theologians; and charismatics from cessationists. In other words, if the faith used in the analogy is one's own set of confessions or doctrines, then the reasoning is circular. And even if we claim that that faith is radically biblical, who or what principle will tell us which verses are the "clear" ones and which are not (on the principle that clearer passages should interpret the unclear ones)? And what Scriptures should be given the status of being norms or standards for the rest?¹¹⁸

Daniel Fuller echoes this concern: "So long as the exegesis of biblical passages is conducted by such analogy-of-faith hermeneutics, it would be difficult for systematic theology to be nourished and corrected by exegetical considerations from the biblical text."¹¹⁹

Second, a much higher priority than buttressing our preferred eschatological view or winning the debate over the meaning of "kingdom" must be *our commitment to form our theology from exegesis and not our exegesis from our theology*. We hunger for profound theology and are dismayed at the superficial spirituality that characterizes much of the church today. Some interpreters fear that if they fail to allow their theology to impact their exegesis, the text will not yield the profound truth they hunger for. But the opposite is true. Becoming a slave to the biblical writer and his text is what yields the profoundest theology. We must heed the words of Milton Terry, who in response to "theological exegesis" gave the following advice:

In the systematic presentation, therefore, of any scriptural doctrine, we are always to make a discriminating use of sound hermeneutical principles. We must not study them in the light of modern systems of divinity, but should aim rather to place ourselves in the position of the sacred writers, and study to obtain the impression their words would naturally have made upon the minds of the first readers. . . . Still less should we allow ourselves to be influenced by any presumptions of what the Scriptures ought to teach. . . . All such presumptions are uncalled for and prejudicial.¹²⁰

Conclusion

These three issues lie at the center of the divide over eschatology: (1) the legitimacy of literal interpretation; (2) the function of progressive revelation; and (3) the influence of theological presupposition. These issues are of immense importance, for the position we take on them does not just determine to which eschatological camp

sufficient, that it is "truth" (John 17:17). This is believed by faith, not proven by an external set of standards. Vicious circular reasoning, however, presupposes the specific *content* of what the biblical text says.

¹¹⁸ Kaiser, "Hermeneutics and the Theological Task," 10.

¹¹⁹ Daniel P. Fuller, "Biblical Theology and the Analogy of Faith," *International Journal of Frontier Missions*, 14 no. 2 (April–June 1997), 67.

¹²⁰ Terry, *Biblical Hermeneutics*, 595.

we belong. It directly impacts our handling of God's Word in general, and that is the highest of responsibilities. As Bernard Ramm reminds us,

We need to know the correct method of Biblical interpretation so that we do not confuse the voice of God with the voice of man. In every one of those places where our interpretation is at fault, we have made substitution of the voice of man for the voice of God.¹²¹

¹²¹ Ramm, *Protestant Biblical Interpretation*, 2.