

ANALYSIS OF THE DISPENSATIONAL APPROACH TO OLD TESTAMENT
PROPHECY

by
John L. Rothra

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Dispensationalism faces attacks from both liberal and conservative theologians alike. Liberals oppose the fundamental doctrines of the conservative evangelicalism underlying dispensationalism; conservatives oppose the hermeneutical approach employed by many dispensationalists.¹ Often, the debate revolves around dispensational eschatology and its view of prophetic texts.

Students of prophecy will encounter dispensationalism, especially in some of the leading and influential prophetic teachers of today such as Jack Van Impe, Hal Lindsey, and Tim LaHaye. Because of the popularity and breadth of influence of dispensationalism in Christianity, an investigation into that paradigm's approach to Old Testament prophecy is necessary. After investigation, one will discover that dispensationalism is not as dangerous or careless with the text as some speculate. While some individual dispensationalists promote false teachings, the theology of dispensationalism is a valid, worthwhile tool in understanding prophetic texts. This will be shown by offering a summary explanation of dispensationalism followed by an analysis of two leading dispensational teachers. Next, an appropriate method of approaching Old Testament prophecy will be offered followed by a critical analysis of the dispensational approach.

¹Charles C. Ryrie, *Dispensationalism* (Chicago, IL: Moody, 2007), 14-15.

Dispensationalism Defined

Dispensationalism is a nuanced category containing a wide range of viewpoints, hermeneutical approaches, and presuppositions. The most common subcategories are classical dispensationalists, including C. I. Scofield² and the more recent progressive dispensationalists such as Darrell Bock and Craig Blaising.³ Before a working definition of dispensationalism can be offered, one must understand what unites and what differentiates these divergent views.

Classical and progressive dispensationalism shares many characteristics. Both views believe in progressive revelation, consistent literal interpretation, a distinction between Israel and the church,⁴ distinct dispensational eras,⁵ and salvation by grace through faith alone.⁶

Despite these similarities, classical and progressive dispensationalism differ on (1) how strictly they distinguish between Israel and the church and (2) what constitutes a literal interpretation. Regarding Israel and the church, classical dispensationalists see Israel returning to the old covenant system while the church serves as a parenthetical

²Michael Williams, *This World is Not My Home: The Origins and Development of Dispensationalism* (Fern, Ross-shire, Scotland: Mentor Imprint, 2003), 213.

³Craig A. Blaising and Darrell L. Bock, *Progressive Dispensationalism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1993), 9-11.

⁴Tim LaHaye and Thomas Ice, *Charting the End Times* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House, 2001), 81-83.

⁵John F. Walvoord, "Reflections on Dispensationalism," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 158, no. 630 (April-June 2001): 132. Ryrie, *Dispensationalism*, 33. Ryrie defines a dispensation as "a distinguishable economy in the outwork of God's purpose."

⁶Hal Lindsey, *Planet Earth: The Final Chapter* (Beverly Hills, CA: Western Front, 1998), 31-33.

interruption in the timeline.⁷ Progressive dispensationalists believe that God relates to both Israel and the church by grace through faith in Christ, but that the church and the nation of Israel will mutually and independently coexist in the future.⁸ Regarding reading Scripture literally, classical dispensationalists hold to a “wooden verbal literalism that only grudgingly accept[s] metaphors or figures of speech”⁹ while progressive dispensationalists readily accept textual criticism, figures of speech, metaphors, and other literary tools.¹⁰

With this basic understanding of the different views within dispensational theology, it is important for one to understand the difference between dispensationalism and non-dispensational theologies. Keith Mathison’s analysis of Charles Ryrie’s definition of dispensationalism reveals only one unique characteristic: the distinction between Israel and the church. It is this view that “has always been acknowledged as true” and is “the cornerstone of dispensational theology.”¹¹ All other supposed unique teachings are shared by various non-dispensational theologies.

⁷C. Vanderwaal, *Hal Lindsey and Biblical Prophecy* (St. Catharines, Ontario: Paideia Press, 1981), 29-32. Vanderwaal notes that despite the distinction made based on the difference between ἐκκλησία (the church) and Ἰσραὴλ (the people of Israel), the Septuagint used ἐκκλησία for the people and the New Testament refers to the church as a “people.” Therefore, he stipulates the church replaces Israel.

⁸Darrell L. Bock, “Why I am a Dispensationalist with a Small 'd',” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 41 (Spring 1998): 390-91. Bock defines this as a “distinguished but reconciled” coexistence. The church does not replace Israel, nor does Israel return to relating to God through the Mosaic Law.

⁹Williams, *This World is Not My Home*, 213.

¹⁰Bock, “Why I am a Dispensationalist with a Small 'd',” 388. Bock acknowledges that while some classical dispensationalists accept this definition of ‘literal,’ they are in the minority.

¹¹Keith A. Mathison, *Dispensationalism: Rightly Dividing the People of God?* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1995), 3-8.

Based on this information, a working definition of dispensationalism is possible. Dispensationalism is a theology that believes that God, through progressive revelation, relates to his creation in various stages, throughout which, Israel is distinct from the church. In other words, dispensationalism maintains three central teachings: progressive revelation, various dispensations, and a distinction between Israel and the church.

Dispensationalist Case Studies

Recent decades brought two dispensationalists into the forefront of prophetic teaching: Hal Lindsey and Tim LaHaye. Lindsey's rise to influence was due in large part to his book, *The Late Great Planet Earth*, and his leadership during the Jesus Revolution of the 1960's and 1970's.¹² LaHaye's influence blossomed with the success of the *Left Behind* series,¹³ which he co-authored with Jerry B. Jenkins. Because of the influence of these two theologians, their dispensational approach to the Old Testament prophetic texts will be examined.

Hal Lindsey

Lindsey's version of dispensationalism resembles more of a classical dispensationalism. He defines it as a theology that "recognizes that God spoke at different times, in different ways, to different ages of humanity, according to His plans

¹²Lowell D. Streiker, *The Jesus Trip: Advent of the Jesus Freaks* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1971), 69-74.

¹³Beverly Rykerd, "Left Behind Series Sells 50 Millionth Copy," [on-line]; accessed 9 January 2007; available from <http://www.leftbehind.com/channelnews.asp?channelID=17&pageid=447>; Internet. As of January 2002, the series sold fifty million copies worldwide.

for the successive stages of history.”¹⁴ He teaches that Scripture’s use of the phrases “ages past” (Rom 16:25), “this present age” (Eph 1:21; Gal 1:4), and “ages to come” (Eph 2:7; Heb 6:5) point to dispensations through history. Each dispensation ends with human failure under certain conditions of that dispensation followed by divine judgment. Lindsey describes the characteristics of a dispensation as (1) the annulment of certain conditions of the old dispensation, (2) the continuation of certain conditions into the next dispensation, and (3) revelation of new promises and responsibilities. As with other dispensationalists, Lindsey’s theology is tied to progressive revelation. However, in each dispensation, salvation is always by grace through faith alone.¹⁵

When it comes to prophecy, especially Old Testament prophecy, Lindsey limits its scope. He states that prophecy serves three purposes: to reveal the cause of the problems of the prophet’s day, to offer “short-range predictions” to be fulfilled within the prophet’s lifetime, and to make “long-range predictions” about the distant future. Lindsey seems to believe that any other type of message delivered by the prophet must be categorized as preaching rather than prophecy.¹⁶

In his application of prophetic texts, three in particular are of great interest. The first is Jeremiah’s prophecy regarding the Jews’ return to their homeland after a great captivity and dispersion. Second is Lindsey’s perspective on temporal terms used in Ezekiel 38. Third is his understanding of Daniel 9 and 11.

¹⁴Lindsey, *Planet Earth: The Final Chapter*, 31.

¹⁵*Ibid.*, 31-33.

¹⁶Hal Lindsey, *The Late Great Planet Earth* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1970), 20.

Hal Lindsey combines Jeremiah's prophecy with the prediction of Moses that Israel will undergo two judgments (Deut 28) and Ezekiel's valley of dry bones (Ezek 37). Lindsey believes that the first judgment of Israel predicted by Moses occurred with their Babylonian captivity. The second judgment occurred after the temple was destroyed by Rome in A.D. 70, citing Deuteronomy 28:64-68, which he believes depicts a great scattering of the Jews after the second judgment. Ezekiel and Jeremiah predict a great re-gathering of Israel. Employing basic logic, Lindsey deduces that since both judgments occurred and because Israel was scattered after the temple's destruction just as predicted, it must be true that the re-gathering of Israel recorded in Jeremiah and Ezekiel must be true. Therefore, Lindsey believes that the predictions by Ezekiel and Jeremiah were fulfilled when Israel became a nation in 1948.¹⁷

Ezekiel chapter thirty-eight records a battle scene between Gog and Israel. Lindsey believes this is a depiction of World War III, also known as Armageddon. His reasoning for reading this text as futuristic is the temporal phrase "latter years" (Ezek 38:8). According to Lindsey, this phrase "denote[s] the time just preceding and including the events which will be climaxed by the second advent of Christ." Therefore, since this phrase is used by the prophet, this event necessarily is the final battle between the forces of Jesus and the forces of Satan.¹⁸

Daniel chapters nine and eleven offer a glimpse into the methodology of Lindsey's interpretation. He reads the prophecy about a prince who makes a covenant

¹⁷Ibid., 44-47. Lindsey believes that Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Amos all predicted the dispersion and re-gathering of Israel. However, he offers no specific Scripture text in Isaiah, Jeremiah, or Amos to support his claim.

¹⁸Ibid., 60.

with Israel for seven years very literally. As a result, he interprets it to be the antichrist who signs a peace treaty with Israel and, halfway through, breaks that treaty.

Furthermore, because the prophecy depicts the ending of sacrifices, he believes the Temple must be rebuilt and sacrifices reestablished in order for the antichrist to end all sacrifices in the temple. Also, because this prince comes from the people who destroyed the temple, and since the Roman Empire destroyed the Temple, the antichrist must be from a reborn Roman Empire.

Despite his very literal reading of chapter nine, Lindsey employs an allegorical approach to chapter eleven. This chapter depicts the same final battle recorded in Ezekiel. In the case of Daniel, Lindsey interprets the one under attack as the Israeli leader; the chariots are mechanized army units; the horsemen are cavalry and ground troops; and the ships are a naval fleet. However, Lindsey also sees Armageddon including a major air strike, though no allegorical depiction is offered by Daniel.¹⁹

Tim LaHaye

Where Hal Lindsey restricts the definition of prophecy, Tim LaHaye broadens the scope of prophecy to include any and all aspects of God's revelation found in Scripture, whether predictive or non-predictive. He also teaches that prophecy should not be spiritualized or allegorized, but should be read literally.²⁰ LaHaye's hermeneutical principle, which he calls the "Golden Rule of Interpretation," states that "when the plain sense of Scripture makes common sense, seek no other sense, but take every word at its

¹⁹Ibid., 151-54.

²⁰LaHaye and Ice, *Charting the End Times*, 11-13.

primary, literal meaning unless the facts of the immediate context clearly indicate otherwise.”²¹

The visions seen by the Old Testament prophets are compared to the perspective of a mountain range. From one angle, a person sees a line of mountain peaks, but the exact distance between the peaks is not clear. In addition, the onlooker does not see what resides in the intervening valleys. From a perpendicular angle, the second onlooker notices the distance between the mountain peaks and what lies in the valleys between.

Applying this imagery to the prophets, LaHaye sees the prophet as the first onlooker. He sees multiple future events as one event because he cannot perceive the time separating each event. Furthermore, the prophet only sees certain events of the future and not the events in the valleys of time between those major events. However, present day prophetic scholars are the second onlooker. They are able to see both the difference in time between the prophecies and the events in take place in the valleys. The church age, beginning at Pentecost and concluding at the rapture, takes place in one of those valleys.²²

Following the “Golden Rule” of hermeneutics, LaHaye developed a unique perspective on some central doctrines and texts. Three of these teachings will serve as samples: Ezekiel’s battle between Gog and Israel, the reason Israel is distinct from the church, and Ezekiel’s temple.

²¹Tim LaHaye, *The Rapture* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House, 2001), 237-38.

²²LaHaye and Ice, *Charting the End Times*, 26-28. LaHaye believes the prophets witnessed seven major events: the incarnation; Calvary; the tribulation, including the rapture, tribulation events, and the Antichrist; the second coming; the Millennial reign; the destruction of the earth by fire; and the new

LaHaye agrees with Lindsey that Ezekiel portrays a futuristic battle between a Russian alliance and Israel in the thirty-eighth chapter. However, LaHaye does not see this as Armageddon, but as a pre-tribulation²³ battle in which God miraculously saves Israel.²⁴ Because Israel is under attack, he speculates that this battle can only occur if Israel exists as a nation. However, the nation of Israel ceased to exist after Rome destroyed it in A.D. 135. The nation was not reborn until 1948,²⁵ meaning Israel did not exist as a nation for approximately 1,800 years.²⁶ Therefore, he concludes that battle takes place after 1948 and, to date, has yet to occur. However, Gary DeMar notes that if LaHaye is to maintain his “Golden Rule” principle, there is no text in Ezekiel 37-38 that calls for reading this text allegorically. The literal, plain sense reading is to see the battle as an ancient battle with ancient weapons. LaHaye, he concludes, abandons his hermeneutical methodology in order to maintain his dispensational presuppositions.²⁷

Tim LaHaye’s hermeneutics cause him to outline four reasons why the church and Israel are distinct entities in Scripture. First, they each have different originators.

heavens and new earth.

²³Tim LaHaye, *Understanding Bible Prophecy for Yourself* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House, 2001), 49-51. LaHaye notes that the tribulation is mentioned at least forty-nine times in the Old Testament and at least fifteen times in the New Testament. Those mentioning it include Jeremiah, David, Isaiah, Moses, Obadiah, Zephaniah, Amos, Joel, Paul, John, and Christ (in Matthew).

²⁴Lindsey, *The Late Great Planet Earth*, 92-93.

²⁵Tim LaHaye, *The Coming Peace in the Middle East* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1984), 12.

²⁶Tim LaHaye, *The Beginning of the End* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House, 1972), 43-44. LaHaye grants that the count can begin with either the destruction of the nation in A.D. 135 or from the beginning of the Roman occupation, at which time Israel ceased to be self-governing. The latter dating results in an independent nation of Israel not existing for approximately 2,500 years.

²⁷Gary DeMar, *End Times Fiction* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2001), 3-11. Although he criticizes LaHaye for approaching Scripture with a dispensational presupposition, DeMar’s critique shows he approaches Scripture with a definite non-dispensational presupposition.

God created Israel; Jesus founded the church. Second, they rest on different foundations. Israel's foundation is the covenant promise of God; the church's foundation is Christ. Third, the church and Israel have different purposes. This is seen in that Israel is never given a commission to make disciples; Jesus gave the church the Great Commission (Matt 28:18-20). Fourth, they have different futures. Israel's future is a restored Davidic kingdom on earth; the church's future is awaiting her in the Father's house.²⁸ However, this view results in pitting the Father against the Son regarding their work and purposes.

The final sample of LaHaye's theology is his view of Ezekiel's temple (Ezek 40-45). He speculates that this is a futuristic temple since the second temple existed at the time the prophecy was recorded. Therefore, this temple will exist in the millennium and God will reinstitute animal sacrifice. However, this will not be a renewing of the Mosaic Law since Christ abolished that law. Instead, the sacrifices will be done to maintain "ceremonial cleanness" in the temple because God will dwell there.²⁹

Approaching Old Testament Prophecy

In order to determine if the approaches of Lindsay, LaHaye, and other dispensational theologians is sound, one must possess a proper understanding of Old Testament prophecy. Furthermore, a proper understanding of prophecy requires understanding its origins. Recent trends in critical scholarship brought about two changes in how one approaches prophecy. First, critical scholars have shown a tendency

²⁸LaHaye, *The Rapture*, 241-42. Walter C. Kaiser, "Israel's Missionary Call," in *Perspective's on the World Christian Movement: A Reader*, eds. Ralph D. Winter and Steven C. Hawthorne (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 1986), 26-31. Kaiser outlines various texts showing God gave Israel a missionary or Great Commission call.

²⁹LaHaye and Ice, *Charting the End Times*, 94-95.

to disregard the origins and original recipients and currently focus on the form of the prophecy. Second, they have abandoned the view of a prophet as a specially gifted person and now view him as a wise guru. J. Lindbaum went beyond the text and placed his focus on the experiences of the individual prophets. Overall, critical scholars today see the spoken prophecy as general theological presuppositions and the written prophetic literature as redacted works edited over many years.³⁰

Claus Westermann, influenced by Hermann Gunkel, proposed removing the narratives and superscriptions from the prophetic text in order to obtain the original spoken prophecy. That new text, he said, should be analyzed independent of the removed redacted material. Such a proposal was typical of the rising influence of form critical methodologies during the 1960's.³¹

Conservative scholars differ from critical scholars in their approach. They believe prophecy finds its origins in the supernatural. It is not the thoughts of mortals, but is something given by God to chosen men. Prophets cannot look into the future; prophets only see the future that God chooses to show to them.³²

Old Testament prophecy falls into four categories: (1) oracles, which are responses to questions posed and are often mysterious; (2) messenger speeches, which are unsolicited information or calls for change;³³ (3) predictions; while not the primary

³⁰W. McKane, "Prophecy and the Prophetic Literature," in *Tradition and Interpretation*, ed. G. W. Anderson (Oxford, England: Clarendon Press, 1979), 163-71.

³¹Ronald E. Clements, *Old Testament Prophecy: From Oracles to Canon* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996), 1-2.

³²G. Seth Murphey, "A Study of the Elements of Old Testament Prophecy" (master's thesis, Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, Fort Worth, TX, 1965), 2, 23-24.

³³John F. A. Sawyer, *Prophecy and the Prophets of the Old Testament* (Oxford, England:

category, they were vital to ensuring the prophet's validity;³⁴ and (4) minor subcategories.³⁵ These four categories are sometimes narrowed down to the categories of foretelling and forth telling. The former includes all predictive prophecies and the latter includes all non-predictive prophecies. Scholars debate over how each prophet related to the predictive visions and words they received from God. G. Seth Murphey argues that not every prophet saw the future with equal clarity or scope. Instead, they perceive the future within their own "horizon" or present setting. Events beyond the prophet's own time were unclear and not understandable.³⁶ However, Reformed dispensationalist J. O. Buswell argued that the prophets fully understood the prophecies, especially their chronological nature.³⁷

Although scholars like Westermann and Gunkel attempted to retrieve the spoken prophecies, it is the written form that exists today. Therefore, scholars are wise to employ a grammatical-historical methodology to understand the prophecies as given in Scripture. This involves examining the text, its literary form, and the literary context of the particular passage.³⁸ Some include the author's setting, worldview, and the understanding of the original audience as part of this method.³⁹

Oxford University Press, 1987), 25-34. Murphey, "A Study of the Elements of Old Testament Prophecy," 39. Murphy sees the messenger speech as calls for Israel to begin keeping the covenant.

³⁴Murphey, "A Study of the Elements of Old Testament Prophecy," 26-28, 40

³⁵Sawyer, *Prophecy and the Prophets of the Old Testament*, 32-34. These minor types included woes, tribal speeches (legal speeches), laments, and hymns.

³⁶*Ibid.*, 28-30.

³⁷Jeffrey Khoo, "Dispensational Premillennialism in Reformed Theology: The Contribution of J. O. Buswell to the Millennial Debate," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 44, no. 4 (December 2001): 701-03.

³⁸E. Hammershaimb, *Some Aspects of Old Testament Prophecy from Isaiah to Malachi*

When discussing prophetic texts, especially predictive prophecies, one must keep in mind the prophecy's fulfillment. There are four types of prophetic fulfillment. The first is immediate fulfillment, meaning the prediction is fulfilled within the prophet's lifetime. The second is New Testament fulfillment. This is where the prediction was completely fulfilled in the New Testament; no future fulfillment exists. Partial fulfillment is the third. Unlike the first two, partial fulfillment means the prediction is fulfilled partially at one point and fulfilled again or more completely in the future.⁴⁰ This type of fulfillment is sometimes called "double fulfillment."⁴¹ The final type is subjective fulfillment, meaning the fulfillment is tied to the choices made by humans.⁴²

The difficulty of understanding prophecy should come as no surprise. Peter stated that even the prophets did not always understand the messages given to them by God (1 Pet 1:10-12). Therefore, it would seem reasonable that since the prophets found understanding the prophecies difficult, then modern scholars "may not be able to understand all of them yet, either."⁴³

(Denmark: Rosenkilde Og Bagger, 1966), 11. Hammershaimb states that prophecy is accurately studied only when it is studied in context with the surrounding texts. Failure to do this by reading the passage independent of the context constitutes "neglect."

³⁹Herbert W. Bateman IV, ed., *Three Central Issues in Contemporary Dispensationalism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, 1999), 64-65.

⁴⁰Murphey, "A Study of the Elements of Old Testament Prophecy," 30-31.

⁴¹Khoo, "Dispensational Premillennialism in Reformed Theology: The Contribution of J. O. Buswell to the Millennial Debate," 701-04. Reformed dispensationalist J. O. Buswell rejected the idea of double fulfillment.

⁴²Murphey, "A Study of the Elements of Old Testament Prophecy," 30-31. Murphy states that the subjective fulfillment are prophecies tied to human actions. The predictive word given by Jonah in Nineveh falls into this type of fulfillment. If Nineveh did not repent, then they would be destroyed. However, since they repented, the prediction of judgment was not fulfilled, though Nineveh was later destroyed for their rebellion.

⁴³David Haggith, *End-Time Prophecies of the Bible* (New York, NY: G. P. Putnam's Sons,

Critical Analysis

Dispensationalism comes under staunch attack from both conservative and critical scholars for a variety of reasons. Despite the evangelical foundation of dispensational theology, conservatives have gone so far as to refer to dispensationalism as a cult full of “dupes.”⁴⁴ However, such strong language is not warranted when discussing dispensationalism as a whole.

Dispensationalism contributes a great deal to Old Testament prophetic scholarship. First, it emphasizes a literal, grammatical-historical approach to prophetic study. Second, dispensationalists emphasize the various dispensations that church leaders have long accepted.⁴⁵ Students of prophecy, whether dispensational or non-dispensational, are wise to adopt these approaches in their study of Old Testament prophecy.

However, some dispensational teachers fail to consistently maintain their own methodologies, resulting in some questionable doctrines. The most suspect is Tim LaHaye’s view of the temple in Ezekiel 40-45. LaHaye’s view that God will re-establish animal sacrifice, whether it is for the purpose of atonement or ceremony, causes the sacrifice of Christ to become insufficient. It is possible that LaHaye allowed his dispensational presuppositions and strict division of Israel and the church to influence his exegesis.

1999), 5-6.

⁴⁴Ryrie, *Dispensationalism*, 14-15.

⁴⁵*Ibid.*, 71-74. Ryrie traces the teaching of dispensations as far back as Justin Martyr (110-165) and Irenaeus (130-200).

This questionable teaching does not warrant ignoring all that LaHaye and other dispensational theologians teach. Instead, prophecy students should seek to glean all that is worthwhile from dispensationalism and employ it to gain a greater understanding of God's prophetic word. However, whether dispensational or non-dispensational, because prophecy is given by God to man, scholars should heed Peter's reminder that no prophecy is left for one's own interpretation (2 Pet 1:20-21). Therefore, all scholars should humbly seek the Holy Spirit's guidance in their approach to scripture while employing a careful and thorough consideration of the nature of Old Testament prophecy.

In final analysis, despite the arguments presented by non-dispensationalists such as DeMar and Mathison, one cannot say that dispensationalists violate conservative teachings in their approach to Old Testament prophecy. One cannot conclude that dispensationalism, as a theological paradigm, ignores the grammatical-historical method of interpretation. Dispensationalism does open the door to potential abuse and neglect of the text. However, it does not fail in all aspects of its interpretive process, but offers much to prophetic scholarship.

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