

## ***Premillennialism Within Eschatology***

***Justin Robert Wright***

### **Introduction**

Eschatology, which is conventionally defined as the doctrine of ‘last things’, whether in relation to human individuals or to the world,<sup>1</sup> has become “the peculiar interest of the modern age...[and is often seen as] the one remaining undeveloped topic of theology.”<sup>2</sup> Over the centuries, though eschatology was never completely forgotten as a Christian doctrine it has not received the ample amount of attention as other doctrines within the Christian faith. In the second century the church delved into the fundamentals of Christianity; the third and fourth centuries dealt with the doctrine of God; at the beginning of the fifth century, man and sin; in the latter fifth to seventh centuries, the church deals with the person of Christ; in the eleventh to sixteenth centuries, the doctrine of the atonement; and finally, in the sixteenth century, more emphasis is placed on justification and the applicability of redemption.<sup>3</sup> However, within the modern era, eighteenth century to the present, there has been more of a preoccupation with eschatology, the doctrine of last things, than any other.<sup>4</sup>

This seemingly recent preoccupation with eschatology, however, has taken many different forms and these various forms have led to the development of, more often than not,

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<sup>1</sup> Walter Elwell, ed., *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2001), s.v. “Eschatology.”

<sup>2</sup> James Orr, *The Progress of Dogma* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1901), 29-30.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> Millard Erickson, *Contemporary Options in Eschatology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book, 1977), 12.

opposing views and groups. Christian eschatology, as one might imagine, includes a rather large number of issues that deal with end-times—death, the rapture of the church, the end of this age, judgment, heaven and hell, and of course the millennium.<sup>5</sup> While each of these issues are important to the discussion of eschatology, one issue in particular has gained a great deal of momentum in terms of its popularity within the last few decades, and that is the issue of the millennium or the theme of the Kingdom of God. Despite the fact that the doctrine of the millennium, as Robert Clouse states, is “[o]ne of the more difficult themes with which interpreters of the Bible must deal,”<sup>6</sup> it has nevertheless progressed as one of the central themes of eschatology.

Being one of the central themes within eschatology, it should come as no surprise, then, that the issue of the millennium is also a much-debated topic with differing views in all circles of Christianity, including that of Evangelicalism.<sup>7</sup> These differing views of the millennium are all attempting to answer the question of whether or not the millennium will be a literal Kingdom, and if so, when the second advent of Christ will take place within the time frame of the millennial reign. These various positions include amillennialism, postmillennialism, and premillennialism. Due to the brevity of this work, however, time will not be given to the discussion of major differences between these three views. Suffice it to say that even though it had a major influence on the church over the centuries, at the present, postmillennialism is not a widely held eschatological scheme, and amillennialism became a major position within the church following the works of

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<sup>5</sup> Craig Blomberg and Sung Chung, eds., *A Case for Historic Premillennialism: An Alternative to “Left Behind” Eschatology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009), 3.

<sup>6</sup> Robert Clouse, ed., *The Meaning of the Millennium: Four Views* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1977), 7.

<sup>7</sup> John Walvoord, “Premillennialism and the Church,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 110, no. 440 (October 1953): 289-290, <http://web.ebscohost.com> (accessed September 29, 2010).

Augustine.<sup>8</sup> Premillennial evidence, on the other hand, is shown to be consistently to the effect, “that throughout the years from the beginning of the second century till the beginning of the fifth chiliasm, particularly of the premillennial type, was extensively found within the Christian Church.”<sup>9</sup> For this reason, it is within the confines of premillennial teachings that this work will remain.

### ***Divisions Within Premillennialism***

Though premillennialism was the most widely accepted view held by the early church concerning the millennium,<sup>10</sup> and continues to be the foremost view among Evangelicals today, it does not render this view immune to problems and divisions. Concerning premillennialism, there are two major distinctions<sup>11</sup> that have been the center of eschatological debate for the last two centuries: historic premillennialism and dispensational premillennialism. Both systems of premillennialism, though they share an acknowledgment of the major tenets within Evangelical Christianity, hold numerous beliefs that are irreconcilable. These differences are numerous if one were to attempt an explanation of the major as well as the minor details. For the purpose of this work, however, the differences that will be discussed will be limited to two central issues: First, the hermeneutical principle used in the interpretation of scripture; and second, the distinction between Israel and the church. After comparing and contrasting the views held by both groups concerning these two central issues, it is the intention of the present writer to

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<sup>8</sup> Erickson, *Contemporary Options in Eschatology*, 55.

<sup>9</sup> D.H. Kromminga, *The Millennium in the Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1945), 27-28.

<sup>10</sup> S.H. Kellogg, “Premillennialism: Its Relations to Doctrine and Practice,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 99, no. 394 (April 1942): 235-236, <http://web.ebscohost.com> (accessed October 1, 2010).

<sup>11</sup> Though this work is only concerned with the distinction between historic and dispensational premillennialism, there are various other divisions within premillennialism, including ultradispensationalism, classic dispensationalism, and progressive dispensationalism.

demonstrate that dispensational premillennialism holds to a more consistent biblical hermeneutic as a whole than does historic premillennialism.

## **Defining Our Terms**

### ***Historic Premillennialism***

The first branch within the premillennial view is that of Historic Premillennialism. While this particular form of premillennialism is much older than that of dispensational premillennialism, it did not develop into the vigorous popular millennialist movement that its dispensational counterpart did. Despite the fact that the Historic view did not gain popularity in recent times, this in no way undermines its dominance among some of the most prominent theologians within the early church.<sup>12</sup> In fact, due to the overwhelming popularity of historic premillennialism within the early church, some have made the claim that there can be found no trace of dispensational theology, at all, in the earliest history of the church. Furthermore, dispensationalism, which could never be arrived at through bible study alone, is nothing more than a man-made idea and should be understood in light of that fact.<sup>13</sup> This popularity, which historic premillennialism had previously obtained, however, was overshadowed by the rise of dispensationalism, which will be dealt with later. Nevertheless, despite the fact that they are in the minority, proponents of historic premillennialism have remained faithful to the tenets of this particular view.

In keeping with the three central issues mentioned above, historic premillennialism deals with each in its own, unique way. First, when it comes to the issue of the hermeneutical

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<sup>12</sup> Hans Schwarz, *On the Way to the Future: A Christian View of Eschatology in the Light of Current Trends in Religion, Philosophy, and Science* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1972), 151.

<sup>13</sup> Charles Ryrie, *Dispensationalism Today* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1965), 65.

principle used in the interpretation of scripture, historic premillennialists do, in fact, hold to an overall literal interpretation of scripture. The use of the literal interpretation, however, according to the historic premillennialist, should not be applied to prophecy, and is rarely applied within any sort of consistency. When it comes to the interpretation of prophecy, then, a more spiritualizing or allegorical hermeneutic must be applied.<sup>14</sup> Second, when dealing with the issue of whether or not a distinction should be made between Israel and the church, this view holds that the church is to be considered the new Israel, and any prophecy which had yet to be fulfilled would be fulfilled by the church.<sup>15</sup> Finally, when it comes to the placement of the rapture of the church, in order to avoid a seeming contradiction, which states that Christ's return will come in two different stages, this view posits that Christ's return will be in one single event, and that event will most likely take place after the tribulation.<sup>16</sup> Though there are obviously many other tenets held by historic premillennialists, it is within the confines of these three tenets in particular that this paper will be limited.

### ***Dispensational Premillennialism***

The second division found within premillennial teachings is that of dispensational premillennialism. Though some have argued that dispensational premillennial thought can be traced as far back as the apostles,<sup>17</sup> most have seen fit to argue that dispensationalism is much more recent than the

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 91.

<sup>15</sup> George Ladd, *The Gospel of the Kingdom* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1959), 117-120.

<sup>16</sup> George Ladd, *The Last Things: An Eschatology for Laymen* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978), 55-56.

<sup>17</sup> See John Walvoord, "The Theological Context of Premillennialism," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 150, no. 600 (Fall 1993): 387-388; C.H. Ryrie, *The Basis of Premillennial Faith* (New York: Loizeaux Brothers, 1953), 17; Clarence Bass, *Backgrounds to Dispensationalism: Its Historical Genesis and Ecclesiastical Implications* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1960), 13-14.

historic view, only having recently gained popularity thanks to John Nelson Darby.<sup>18</sup> In fact, J.E. Bear in his treatment of dispensational premillennialism begins by stating that “dispensationalism as we know it today is of comparatively recent origin, having had its beginnings in England in the last century among the Plymouth Brethren.”<sup>19</sup> This statement by Bear, along with numerous other arguments for a more recent origin of dispensationalism, has often been used in an attempt to discredit dispensationalism’s place among legitimate premillennial views. Even George Ladd, though he has not completely discredited this premillennial view, does make this view so distinct that he places it within its own category when it comes to interpretations over the Kingdom of God.<sup>20</sup> Despite these claims, however, many opponents to dispensationalism, such as amillennialist W.H. Rutgers, find it objectionable to make claims about the recent origin of dispensationalism. Rutgers, though in full agreement that dispensationalism did not become a popular view, nor did it receive widespread acceptance until the last few decades of the nineteenth century, says that anyone who would state that dispensationalism is a modern invention of the last few decades speaks fallaciously.<sup>21</sup> Nevertheless, even though many over the years have attempted to discredit dispensationalism as a legitimate premillennial view, it has, unlike historic premillennialism, still developed into a vigorous and popular millennialist movement.<sup>22</sup>

Dispensationalism, as defined by John Walvoord, “is an approach to the Bible that recognizes differing moral

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<sup>18</sup> LeAnn Flesher, “The Historical Development of Premillennial Dispensationalism,” *Review and Expositor* 106, no. 2 (Winter 2009): 35-36, <http://web.ebscohost.com> (accessed October 5, 2010).

<sup>19</sup> J.E. Bear, “Dispensationalism and The Covenant of Grace,” *The Union Seminary Review*, (July 1938): 2.

<sup>20</sup> George Ladd, *Crucial Questions About the Kingdom of God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1952), 48.

<sup>21</sup> W.H. Rutgers, *Premillennialism in America* (Goes, Netherlands: Oosterbaan & Le Countre, 1930), 172.

<sup>22</sup> Blomberg and Chung, *A Case for Historic Premillennialism*, 15.

responsibilities for people, in keeping with how much they knew about God and His ways.”<sup>23</sup> In other words, within this view of the Bible, dispensations are periods of time or a period of time in which God deals with mankind differently than He might have done in another period of time.<sup>24</sup> In general, dispensationalists frame God’s work throughout history into seven dispensations: The dispensation of innocence, the dispensation of conscience, the dispensation of civil government, the dispensation of promise or patriarchal rule, the dispensation of the Mosaic law, the dispensation of grace or the messianic dispensation, and the dispensation of the millennium.<sup>25</sup> While some dispensationalist hold to fewer than seven dispensations, and some hold to more than seven, the point is still made that the dispensationalists, unlike the historic premillennialists, believe that history can be divided into periods of time where God dealt with different people in different ways. Furthermore, when it comes to the three central issues with which this paper is concerned, dispensationalists also have their own, unique way of handling each issue. First, when it comes to the hermeneutic applied to the interpretation of scripture the dispensationalist applies a literal or normal hermeneutic. In other words, “the Bible must be taken literally as the Word of God, and its meaning must not be ‘spiritualized.’”<sup>26</sup> Second, since dispensationalists believe that the Old Testament prophecy should be interpreted literally, they do not believe that the church is predicted in the Old Testament as historic premillennialists do. Therefore, since the church is not predicted, then it cannot fulfill Israel’s prophetic programs,

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<sup>23</sup> John Walvoord, “Reflections on Dispensationalism,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 158 (Spring 2001): 132, <http://web.ebscohost.com> (accessed September 2010).

<sup>24</sup> Clarence Bass, *Backgrounds to Dispensationalism: Its Historical Genesis and Ecclesiastical Implications* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1960), 19.

<sup>25</sup> See Charles Ryrie, *Dispensationalism Today* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1965), 57-64; Cornelius Woelfkin, “The Religious Appeal of Premillennialism,” *The Journal of Religion* 1, no. 3 (May 1921): 256-259, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1195267> (accessed September 9, 2010).

<sup>26</sup> Bass, *Backgrounds to Dispensationalism*, 21.

which is why dispensationalists teach that Israel and the church are two distinct bodies of saints; both having purposes and dealings with God peculiar to each one.<sup>27</sup> Finally, since dispensationalism uses the literal approach to interpreting scripture, the same hermeneutical principle is applied when dealing with key passages on the rapture as well.<sup>28</sup> Therefore, when it comes to the question of the timing of the rapture in relation to the tribulation, dispensational premillennialists believe that the rapture will take place prior to the tribulation.

## **Historic Premillennialism**

### ***Scriptural Interpretation***

As with any other approach to the interpretation of scripture, the historic premillennial approach has its own unique hermeneutical assumptions. Let it be said that while the present writer does not want to imply that these principles apply to all historic premillennialists, it should be noted that the majority of historic premillennialists do hold to these beliefs.<sup>29</sup> Therefore, when it comes to the hermeneutical beliefs of historic premillennialism, there is one main belief upon which this paper will focus and upon which all other scriptural interpretation will be based. This main belief states that historic premillennialists hold to a hermeneutical approach in which the New Testament takes precedence over the Old Testament. In other words, the Old Testament must be reinterpreted in light of the New Testament.<sup>30</sup> Not only

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<sup>27</sup> John Walvoord, "Premillennialism and the Church." *Bibliotheca Sacra* 110, no. 440 (O. 1953): 291-292, <http://web.ebscohost.com> (accessed September 29, 2010).

<sup>28</sup> John Walvoord, "Premillennialism and the Tribulation." *Bibliotheca Sacra* 111, no. 443 (Jl. 1954): 201, <http://web.ebscohost.com> (accessed September 30, 2010).

<sup>29</sup> Though there are numerous individuals from whom I could draw the basic beliefs of Historic Premillennialism, for the remainder of this section, the views of George Eldon Ladd will be used to speak for the majority of historic premillennialists.

<sup>30</sup> Clouse, *The Meaning of the Millennium*, 21.



does this hermeneutical approach affect the way scripture is interpreted, but also, as we will see later, it also affects the way historic premillennialists view Israel and the church, and it affects their placement of the rapture in reference to the tribulation.

Since historic premillennialists hold to the priority of the New Testament over the Old, it should come as no surprise that historic premillennialists also uphold the belief that the New Testament should be the starting point by which one can gain an understanding of Old Testament in general, specifically prophetic passages. George Ladd, one of the major advocates of historic premillennialism, also argues that the New Testament must interpret the Old Testament. Ladd, in order to prove his point, goes on to say that

Dispensationalism forms its eschatology by a literal interpretation of the Old Testament and then fits the New Testament into it. A non-dispensational [or historic] eschatology forms its theology from the explicit teaching of the New Testament. It confesses that it cannot be sure how the Old Testament prophecies of the end are to be fulfilled, for (a) the first coming of Christ was accomplished in terms not foreseen by a literal interpretation of the Old Testament, and (b) there are unavoidable indications that the Old Testament promises to Israel are fulfilled in the Christian church.<sup>31</sup>

Based on the previous quote, it is safe to say that Ladd, along with other historic premillennialists, believes that all the promises made to the Israelites in the Old Testament can be or will be applied spiritually to the New Testament church. In an effort to support this thesis, Ladd refers to Paul's use of the Olive Tree in Romans 11:19, 23, 24, and 26. In this passage,

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<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 27.

the olive tree has grown with both natural branches (Israel) and wild branches (Gentiles). If God allows wild branches to be grafted to the Olive tree, then “how much more will these, the natural branches, be grafted back into their own olive tree.”<sup>32</sup> Ladd goes on to say that after this time of hardening and re-grafting, “all Israel will be saved.”<sup>33</sup> Though Ladd is unable to give the exact details as to how this is going to take place, the point he is attempting to make is that since both the natural and wild branches grow from the same olive tree, seeing Israel’s promises and prophecies fulfilled in the church seems quite obvious.<sup>34</sup>

Another example used by Ladd to prove that the New Testament writers took Old Testament promises and applied them to the church comes from Acts 2:16. In this passage, one can read Peter’s sermon, and see where he used the prophecy in Joel chapter 2, which gives the promise of God to pour out His Spirit on all flesh.<sup>35</sup> Ladd argues that since Joel foresees the restoration of Israel, and then speaks of God’s pouring out of His spirit, it is obvious that Acts chapter 2 gives us a clear example of a promise being given to Israel and being fulfilled in the church.<sup>36</sup> Based on this example, as well as the first, it is clear that Ladd’s hermeneutic, as well as the majority of Historic premillennialists, gives priority to the New Testament, which in turn necessitates the use of a spiritualization or allegorical interpretation of the Old Testament. In not so many words, Ladd concludes his

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<sup>32</sup> Romans 11:24 (English Standard Version); The English Standard Version will be the version used throughout this work unless otherwise noted.

<sup>33</sup> Romans 11:26

<sup>34</sup> Clouse, *The Meaning of the Millennium*, 27-28.

<sup>35</sup> Joel 2:28-29

<sup>36</sup> Larry Tyler, “An Analysis of Amillennialism, Historic Premillennialism, Progressive Dispensationalism, and Traditional Dispensationalism: A Hermeneutical Analysis of the Fulfillment of the Abrahamic, Davidic, and New Covenants in Contemporary Evangelical Research.” (PhD. diss., Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2006), 66. In ProQuest Dissertations and Theses, <http://library.sebts.edu/proquest> (accessed September 2010).

argument for the reinterpretation of the Old Testament in light of the New by making the statement that if Jesus and the apostles did it, then so can he.<sup>37</sup>

### ***Israel and the Church***

As a result of the hermeneutical approach utilized by historic premillennialists, which gives a spiritual reinterpretation of the Old Testament in light of the New, those who hold to a historic view are, in a way, forced to identify the church with spiritual Israel. No distinction is to be made between Israel and the church. To prove his point, Ladd, once again, references the Pauline passage concerning the olive tree. In short, Ladd believes that the church, which consists of both Jews and Gentiles, is representative of the olive tree. Therefore, the people of God not only consist of Jews, but all believers including Gentiles, all of which can be found within the church.<sup>38</sup> Furthermore, since it is the common teaching, as we have already seen, for historic premillennialists to base their eschatological and ecclesiological beliefs on the New Testament, then it is only logical that all Old Testament promises to Israel are going to, if they have not been already, be fulfilled by the Christian church, because it is only through the new covenant that Israel can be saved.<sup>39</sup>

To further his point, Ladd uses the illustration by Paul in Romans 9. In this passage, Paul is talking specifically about the church, and to prove that it was God's purpose to call these people into being, Paul uses a direct quote from Hosea. In essence, within the two prophetic passages quoted by Paul, Hosea sees a day when God's people will repent and a future salvation will be secured. It is Ladd's contention that "Paul deliberately takes these two prophecies about the future

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<sup>37</sup> Ladd, *The Last Things*, 17.

<sup>38</sup> George Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974), 561-562.

<sup>39</sup> Ladd, *The Last Things*, 28.

salvation of Israel and applies them to the church.”<sup>40</sup> By doing so, Paul, according to Ladd, has proven the point that the church is now the people of God, consisting of both Jews and Gentiles. And “if this is a ‘spiritualizing hermeneutic,’ so be it”<sup>41</sup> says Ladd. This idea of the church as spiritual Israel, however, is seen in more than just the writings of Paul. Numerous times, Abraham is referred to as the father of us all,<sup>42</sup> and in the book of Jeremiah, chapter 31, the prophet foresees a new covenant being made with Israel, and one which is characterized by a new work of God in their hearts.<sup>43</sup> Based on these passages alone, Ladd believes that it is clear from scripture that the church is spiritual Israel, and he, along with other historic premillennialists, sees no reason for making a distinction between the two.

Unfortunately, while Ladd appears to give a fairly sound argument with respect to his position on a spiritualizing hermeneutic, which leads inevitably to an identification of the church as spiritual Israel, it is not as strong of an argument as one might think. According to Dwight Pentecost, “The interpretation of prophecy requires attention to the same considerations in regard to words, context, grammar, and historical situations that are the accepted principles in respect to any field of interpretation.”<sup>44</sup> Pentecost goes on to say that “like all other areas of Biblical interpretation, [prophecy] must be interpreted literally.”<sup>45</sup> A.B. Davidson in the affirmative states, “This I consider the first principle in prophetic interpretation—to read the prophet literally—to assume that the literal meaning is *his* meaning—that he is moving among realities, not symbols, among concrete things like peoples, not

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<sup>40</sup> Clouse, *The Meaning of the Millennium*, 23-24.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>42</sup> Rom. 4:11, 16; Gal. 3:7, 19.

<sup>43</sup> Clouse, *The Meaning of the Millennium*, 25.

<sup>44</sup> Dwight Pentecost, *Things to Come: A Study in Biblical Eschatology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1958), 59.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 60.

among abstractions like *our* Church, world, etc.”<sup>46</sup> The only reason for giving a non-literal or spiritualizing hermeneutic of interpretation, argues Pentecost, is a desire to avoid the blatant interpretation of the passage in question; a desire to bring the prophecies or general teachings of scripture in line with one’s predetermined theological system, instead of in line with the scriptures themselves. If we are to know how God will handle unfulfilled prophecy, then it is in one’s best interest to find out how He dealt with it in the past. In contrast to what has been said by Ladd, Feinberg believes that the prophecies concerning the suffering servant were fulfilled with the first advent of Christ, and if this is the case, and the present writer believes that it is, then the only conclusion to draw is that “the New Testament literal method of fulfillment establishes the literal method as God’s method in regard to unfulfilled prophecy.”<sup>47</sup> Therefore, when it comes to the unfulfilled prophecy of Israel, one should understand these prophecies as one day being literally fulfilled for literal Israel, not through the church.

## **Dispensational Premillennialism**

### ***Scriptural Interpretation***

Dispensational premillennialism, unlike its historic counterpart, is much more than a description of future events and peoples based on allegorical interpretations of the Old Testament, but rather, it is an entire system of interpretation. Dispensationalism appreciates the meaning and significance of the entire Bible.<sup>48</sup> As a way of interpreting the Bible as a whole, dispensationalists maintain that their hermeneutical approach is of literal interpretation. By literal interpretation, the dispensationalist means that every word is given the same meaning that it would have received within its normal usage.

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<sup>46</sup> A.B. Davidson, *Old Testament Prophecy*, 167 in Dwight Pentecost, *Things to Come*, 60.

<sup>47</sup> Pentecost, *Things to Come*, 61.

<sup>48</sup> Ryrie, *Dispensationalism Today*, 86-87.

This does not, however, mean that every passage is interpreted literally; literalists do not deny that the Bible uses figurative language and symbols within prophecy. The literalist position is simply that prophecies be interpreted as literally as they can, respecting the historical and grammatical context.<sup>49</sup>

Though there are numerous explanations as to why dispensationalists support the literal hermeneutical principle, Charles Ryrie offers three reasons that he believes are worthy of mention. First, the literal principle is applied for philosophical reasons, purporting that language itself requires a literal interpretation. If in fact God created language, and the sole purpose behind this creation was to reveal His message to man, then it seems to follow that the plain language of scripture is sufficient to convey all of His message. This would mean that the message He conveyed in the Old Testament would not need to be reinterpreted by the New since the same language is used in both Testaments, including prophetic passages. Second, a literal principle is applied for a Biblical reason, which is simply that the Old Testament prophecies concerning the first advent of Christ were all fulfilled literally. Since there is no non-literal fulfillment in the New Testament of these prophecies, a strong argument has just been made for the literal approach. Since the prophecies concerning Jesus were literally fulfilled, then what would make one think that other Old Testament prophecies will not also be fulfilled in the same way? Therefore, there is no reason to think that the prophecies concerning Israel will be fulfilled by the church; using the literal interpretation, these prophecies will be fulfilled by those to whom they were spoken. Finally, a literal principle is applied for a logical reason, i.e., if one refuses to use a literal method of interpretation, then subjectivity wins and almost all objectivity is lost. Without objectivity, who is to say which interpretation is right and which one is wrong? The loss of an

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

objective truth would result in more interpretations than there are people. Therefore, a literal hermeneutic is not only philosophically and biblically superior, but it is also a more logical choice.<sup>50</sup>

### ***Israel and the Church***

Due to the fact that dispensationalism hold to a literal approach to the interpretation of scripture, then it must also be applied to God's promises to Abraham with the instituting of the nation of Israel. If the literal hermeneutic is applied here, then there are two conclusions that must follow:<sup>51</sup> "God binds Himself to fulfill every promise to Israel exactly, and, since every detail of these covenants has not yet been fulfilled, Christ's future reign on earth will be for the purpose of fulfilling them in a relation to Israel *distinctly different from His present relation to the church.*"<sup>52</sup> In order to show this distinction between the church and Israel more fully, Ryrie gives a couple examples of how the church is unique. First, the church has a distinct character from that of Israel. We are told throughout the New Testament that the church is the body of Christ and that He is the head.<sup>53</sup> However, the church as the body of Christ did not come about until Pentecost, and this should be a major distinction since Israel had existed long before that.<sup>54</sup> Furthermore, even after the church had been established at Pentecost, Israel was still addressed as a nation in contrast to the Gentiles.<sup>55</sup> Second, according to Ryrie, the church has a distinct time or it is distinct to this present age. In Ephesians 2:15, Paul makes it very clear that the church is a "new man," which was only made possible after the death of

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<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 88-89.

<sup>51</sup> Bass, *Backgrounds to Dispensationalism*, 24-25.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 25.

<sup>53</sup> Eph. 1:22-23; Col. 1:18; 1 Cor. 12:27.

<sup>54</sup> Ryrie, *Dispensationalism Today*, 134.

<sup>55</sup> Erickson, *Contemporary Options in Eschatology*, 117—(cites Acts 3:12; 4:8, 10; 5:21, 31, 35; 21:28).

Christ. Therefore, the church was not constituted in the Old Testament, which makes it distinct from Israel.<sup>56</sup>

Within the New Testament, there are distinct words used for both Israel and the church. The use of these words clearly show that, as Erickson puts it, “in the New Testament national Israel continues with her own promises and the Church is never equated with a so—called ‘new Israel’ but is carefully and continually distinguished as a separate work of God in this age.”<sup>57</sup> The implication of what has just been said, therefore, is that the word Israel is always to be taken in its most literal sense, and never to be taken in a spiritualized sense as in the church. All this leads to the logical conclusion that if we take the term Israel in its most literal context, then it means that all the promises from God to Abraham must be fulfilled literally within the nation of Israel. The church is totally unforeseen within the Old Testament, which means that the prophecies and promises given belong to the literal nation of Israel.<sup>58</sup> This is not to say that the church cannot partake in the benefits of the promises, but what it does mean is that these promises and prophecies are not completely fulfilled within the church. Being consistent with a literal interpretation of scripture can aid one in seeing this distinction between Israel and the church.

## **Conclusion**

While much more can be said concerning the differences between dispensational and historic premillennialism, the two issues covered in this paper are the two major tenets within each group. The first tenet that was dealt with was the hermeneutic used by each group in their interpretation of scripture. Historic premillennialists, while holding to a literal approach when it comes to certain parts of scripture, for the

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<sup>56</sup> Ryrie, *Dispensationalism Today*, 137-138.

<sup>57</sup> Erickson, *Contemporary Options in Eschatology*, 119.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 119-120



most part, a spiritualizing hermeneutic is used because of the idea that the Old Testament must be reinterpreted in light of the New Testament. If it is true that the Old Testament must be reinterpreted by the New, then it appears as though the Old Testament has just lost all historical reliability. Furthermore, it also appears that there is very little consistency within the historic approach to scripture. It is almost as if the historic premillennialist gets to pick and choose what passages will be interpreted literally and which passages will be interpreted allegorically, regardless of genre. As Ryrie has already stated, objectivity is lost, and subjectivity becomes the pervading reality. Following from this allegorical interpretation of scripture, historic premillennialists also see the church as fulfilling Israel's program. In other words, the nation of Israel becomes synonymous with the church, and the church will carry out all the prophecies that have yet to be fulfilled. Once again, by claiming that the church fulfills Israel's program, the historic premillennialist has just removed all historical and linguistic significance from the Old Testament prophets. Unfortunately, God spoke as plainly in the Old Testament as He does in the New, and if this position is to hold any significance, it might need to start by being a little more consistent.

Dispensationalism, on the other hand, when it comes to the hermeneutical approach to scripture, uses a consistent literal approach with respect to genres. With respect to genres simply means that dispensationalism does not deny the existence of figurative language within certain genres, but it does apply the literal method as much as possible. By applying the literal method as opposed to the allegorical method, dispensationalism accomplishes a number of things. First, the literal hermeneutic allows for the dispensationalist to be more consistent. The Old Testament does not have to be reinterpreted by the New; instead, the Old Testament is taken at face value, which preserves the cultural and historical significance of each passage. Furthermore, by maintaining a literal approach, the original meaning of a specific text does

not have to be changed because dispensationalism sees no need to reinterpret the Old Testament. By refusing to reinterpret the Old Testament, dispensationalism maintains that Israel and the promises and prophecies given them in the Old Testament are going to literally be fulfilled in them, not the church. Based on the arguments given above concerning different words used in the New Testament for Israel and the church, as well as the more recent advent of the church, it is safe to say that a distinction has clearly been made between Israel and the church, which is more in line with New Testament teaching to begin with.

Therefore, a literal approach seems to be the best approach not only because it upholds the integrity of the historical background of the people, places and events involved, but it also is more consistent with biblical interpretation as a whole. Meanings do not have to be changed to prove a point, and passages do not have to be allegorized to fit one's presuppositions. Furthermore, by using this approach, it becomes clear that Israel has its own purpose within the workings of God, and the church should be seen as distinct. The only way one can see the church as the spiritual Israel is by spiritualizing Old Testament and New Testament prophecies and promises. But as we have already seen, if one is going to interpret scripture literally in some areas, one must do it in all areas unless otherwise stated. It is because of these reasons that dispensational premillennialism is more consistent with Biblical interpretation as a whole than is historic premillennialism.

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