

THE HERMENEUTICS OF NON-DISPENSATIONALISM

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This paper highlights the hermeneutics of non-dispensationalism so the reader can grasp how non-dispensationalism differs from Dispensationalism concerning hermeneutics and the Bible's storyline.¹ By "non-dispensationalism" we refer to evangelical theological systems that disagree with Dispensationalism on how to understand the Bible.² In doing so, we will use quotations from several non-dispensational scholars. Yet our focus is on the interpretive principles of non-dispensationalism and not the particular scholars mentioned. We quote the various authors to show how a specific hermeneutical point associated with non-dispensationalism differs from that of Dispensationalism. Then each point will be followed by a dispensational response.

A broad reading of Genesis through Malachi reveals the importance of tangible entities such as the earth, national Israel, the land of Israel, nations, physical blessings, Jerusalem, David's throne, structural temples, and other things. Not only are these mentioned often, but many promises, prophecies, and covenants involve these matters. Even the last two verses of the Old Testament discuss the Day of the Lord, the salvation of Israel, and the importance of the land (see Mal. 4:5–6). No indication exists in the Old Testament that these matters will lose their significances in God's purposes. Yet many scholars argue that the arrival of Jesus and the New Testament brings a major change to the Bible's storyline. A transformation allegedly transpires, and several Old Testament realities lose their significance. A reality shift occurs as Old Testament entities transition to new spiritual realities in the context of a new story. We now survey the interpretation principles linked with this idea.

1. New Testament Priority over the Old Testament

Dispensationalism believes in "passage priority" in which the meaning of any Bible passage is found in that passage, whether in the Old Testament or New Testament. Non-dispensationalists, though, often assert belief in *New Testament priority*. This is the view that the New Testament has interpretive priority over Old Testament passages. Supposedly, the meanings of Old Testament passages are found in New Testament interpretations or

¹ The material in this section is taken from Michael J. Vlach, *Dispensational Hermeneutics: Interpretation Principles that Guide Dispensationalism's Understanding of the Bible's Storyline* (Cary, NC: Theological Studies Press, 2022).

² This includes but is not limited to the systems of Covenant Theology and Progressive Covenantalism, and the millennial views of Amillennialism, Postmillennialism, and Laddian Historic Premillennialism.

reinterpretations. As Richard Gaffin puts it, “hermeneutical priority belongs to New Testament statements.”³ Robert Strimple claims the key to understanding Old Testament prophecies is found with the New Testament that teaches us how to interpret them:

But is it correct to interpret such Old Testament prophecies as descriptions of a future millennial kingdom that Christ will establish on this earth at his second coming? To answer that, the crucial question the Christian must ask, of course, is this: How does the New Testament teach us to interpret such passages?⁴

George Ladd claimed that the watershed difference between dispensational and non-dispensational theologies is that non-dispensationalism forms its theology from the New Testament, not the Old Testament:

Here is the basic watershed between a dispensational and a non-dispensational 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. 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.⁵

To use an example, Ladd claims Peter’s use of the Old Testament in Acts 2 “involves a rather *radical reinterpretation* of the Old Testament prophecies, but no more so than the entire *reinterpretation* of God’s redemptive plan by the early church.”⁶ Ladd uses the principle of New Testament priority to posit a “radical reinterpretation” not only of Old Testament prophecies, but God’s redemptive plan. This is a serious claim and shows how the principle of New Testament priority can be used to bring radical change to the Bible’s storyline.

Dispensational Response

Dispensationalism disagrees with the non-dispensational view of New Testament priority over the Old Testament. The New Testament does not teach this, and there are no examples where a New Testament passage overrides the original meaning of an Old Testament text. All Scripture is inspired and contributes to God’s revelation no matter where it is found. The New

³ Richard B. Gaffin, Jr., “The Redemptive-Historical View,” in *Biblical Hermeneutics: Five Views*, eds., Stanley E. Porter and Beth M. Stovell (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2012), 98. Gaffin states this is especially true for “overall generalizations about the Old.”

⁴ Robert B. Strimple, “Amillennialism,” *Three Views of the Millennium and Beyond*, ed. Darrell L. Bock (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1999), 84.

⁵ George Eldon Ladd, “Historic Premillennialism,” in *The Meaning of the Millennium: Four Views*, ed. Robert G. Clouse (Downers Grove, InterVarsity Press, 1977), 27.

⁶ George Eldon Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament*, Revised Edition (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 373. Emphases mine.

Testament offers more information concerning God’s plans. But to posit that certain parts of Scripture exert priority over other parts creates a division in Scripture that Scripture itself does not promote. God’s Word harmonizes, it does not change other revelation.

Strimple is wrong that the crucial question concerns how the New Testament teaches us to interpret Old Testament prophecies. This question is artificial and introduces something the New Testament writers never considered. They were not thinking in terms of reinterpreting or transcending earlier revelation. They believed that what they wrote was consistent with what the earlier prophets predicted. The New Testament writers assumed the message and integrity of the Old Testament writings, which was their Scripture. They connected what was occurring with Jesus to the Old Testament, but they did not claim to transform or reinterpret the earlier Hebrew Scriptures.

In addition to muting the voice of the Old Testament, the New Testament priority view subjects Scripture to human subjectivity since meaning is sought beyond what the Old Testament authors meant. As Paul Feinberg notes: “the claim that one’s hermeneutic for OT predictions must grow out of the NT’s use of the OT is sufficiently ambiguous that almost anyone can affirm it and mean by it whatever they so choose.”⁷ Darrell Bock also points out that the New Testament priority approach is “subversive retrojection of the NT back to the Old” that negates what God explicitly affirmed:

[the] claim of New Testament priority is a subversive retrojection of the NT back to the Old that actually loses some of what the inspiring God had committed himself to doing. No amount of pleading on behalf of a certain type of typology can deny this linguistic canceling effect on the text. The result is not a unifying of scriptural teaching but a negating and limiting of what God affirmed, resulting in a reductionist reading of the text. . . .”⁸

In sum, Dispensationalism disagrees with the non-dispensational view of New Testament priority. New Testament priority divides Scripture and introduces an unbiblical canon-within-a-canon approach that defangs the Old Testament from its inspired contributions. It also makes earlier revelation subject to subjective understandings. This is a tampering with Scripture that Dispensationalism is not willing to do.

2. Nonliteral Fulfillments of Old Testament Prophecies

Non-dispensationalists sometimes claim that some Old Testament prophecies should not be interpreted literally. Anthony Hoekema, for instance, asserted that while “many Old Testament prophecies are indeed to be interpreted literally, many others are to be interpreted

⁷ Paul D. Feinberg, “Hermeneutics of Discontinuity,” *Continuity and Discontinuity: Perspectives on the Relationship Between the Old and New Testaments*, ed. John S. Feinberg (Downers Grove, IVP, 1988), 116.

⁸ Darrell Bock, “A Progressive Dispensational Response,” in *Covenantal and Dispensational Theologies: Four Views on the Continuity of Scripture*, eds. Brent E. Parker and Richard J. Lucas (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2022), 222. Bock refers to the essay by the Covenantalist, Michael Horton, with this statement.

in a nonliteral way.”⁹ Graeme Goldsworthy also claimed, “For the New Testament the interpretation of the Old Testament is not ‘literal’ but ‘Christological’. That is to say that the coming of the Christ transforms all the Kingdom terms of the Old Testament into gospel reality.”¹⁰

Benjamin Merkle, too, has addressed the issue of understanding Old Testament restoration prophecies about Israel in the Old Testament. He asserts that, at times, earthly and physical language in Old Testament prophecies should not be taken literally: “At times, the prophets are forced to picture the future kingdom in terms that transcend the earthly or physical. Therefore, we must not interpret their earthly, physical descriptions in a literal manner. To do so minimizes the work of Christ.”¹¹ Merkle raises the stakes by saying that interpreting Old Testament prophecies literally can lead to minimizing Jesus’ work.

Gentry and Wellum claim that a fundamental error of Dispensationalism involves interpreting Israel and the land of Israel literally when it should interpret these typologically:

In the case of dispensational theology, if they viewed as typological both the land of Israel and the nation itself, then their view, at its core, would no longer be valid. Why? For the reason that the land promise would not require a future, “literal” fulfillment in the millennial age; the land itself is a type and pattern of Eden and thus the entire creation, which reaches its fulfillment in the dawning of a new creation. Christ, then, as the antitype of Israel, receives the land promise and fulfills it by his inauguration of a new covenant which is organically linked to the new creation.¹²

O. Palmer Robertson believes that typological interpretation should lead to “another kind of ‘literal’ fulfillment”:

Some might insist that “literal” fulfillment of new covenant prophecy requires the return of ethnic Israel to a geographically located Palestine. Yet the replacement of the typological with the actual as a principle of biblical interpretation points to another kind of “literal” fulfillment.¹³

Likewise, Mark Karlberg believes typological interpretation should be used to rule out literal fulfillment of land promises to Israel: “But genuine typological interpretation rules out any additional literal fulfillment of the land promise in a future restoration of national Israel

⁹ Anthony A. Hoekema, “Amillennialism,” in *The Meaning of the Millennium: Four Views* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1977), 172.

¹⁰ Graeme Goldsworthy, *Gospel and Kingdom: A Christian Interpretation of the Old Testament* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 1994), 88.

¹¹ Benjamin L. Merkle, “Old Testament Restoration Prophecies Regarding the Nation of Israel: Literal or Symbolic?” *The Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* 14.1 (2010): 22.

¹² Peter J. Gentry and Stephen J. Wellum, *Kingdom through Covenant: A Biblical-Theological Understanding of the Covenants* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), 122.

¹³ O. Palmer Robertson, *The Christ of the Covenants* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1980), 300.

subsequent to or alongside the messianic fulfillment.”¹⁴ Thus, one hermeneutical tactic of non-dispensationalism is nonliteral fulfillment of Old Testament prophecies.

Dispensational Response

Dispensationalism denies that Old Testament prophecies should be interpreted nonliterally. Instead, all passages of Scripture should be interpreted in a literal manner, including Old Testament prophecies. The New Testament understands Old Testament prophecies literally, and so should we. For non-literal interpretation to be accepted there needs to be compelling evidence, and non-dispensationalists have not offered compelling evidence. Hoekema’s claim that some Old Testament prophecies should be taken literally while others should not be taken literally is not sufficiently explained and comes across as arbitrary. Trying to figure out which passages should be understood literally and nonliterally is a risky endeavor in our opinion. Dispensationalism believes the best approach is to be consistent and understand all Old Testament passages, including prophecies, in a grammatical-historical manner as the Old Testament authors intended.

3. Spiritualization

Closely related to the idea of “nonliteral interpretation” is “spiritualization.” Spiritualization involves attributing a non-literal or spiritual understanding to a Bible passage. It often involves transforming a physical or national entity in the Old Testament into a spiritual thing. A classic statement concerning spiritualization is found with George Ladd:

The Old Testament must be interpreted by the New Testament. 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.¹⁵

For Ladd, physical blessings can be transformed into spiritual blessings. And promises addressed to national Israel can find exclusive fulfillment in the church. Louis Berkhof said that the New Testament “does contain abundant indications of the spiritual fulfilment of the promises given to Israel.”¹⁶ Kim Riddlebarger says the New Testament can “spiritualize” Old Testament passages: “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

¹⁴ Mark W. Karlberg, *Covenant Theology in the Reformed Perspective: Collected Essays and Book Reviews in Historical, Biblical, and Systematic Theology* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2000), 195.

¹⁵ George E. Ladd, “Revelation 20 and the Millennium,” *Review and Expositor* 57 (1960): 167. Emphases added.

¹⁶ Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1941), 713. To support this claim Berkhof cited Matthew 21:43; Acts 2:29-36; 15:14-18; Romans 9:25-26; Hebrews 8:8-13; 1 Peter 2:9; Revelation 1:6; 5:10.

of that New Testament interpretation, not vice versa.”¹⁷ Waltke believes a spiritual hermeneutic should lead to a spiritual view of the kingdom instead of a tangible understanding:

Since he [Jesus] was offering a spiritual, heavenly kingdom as a fulfillment of the OT expectation, it follows that the promises of that kingdom in the prophetic and apocalyptic literature should be interpreted not literalistically with reference to the earth, but spiritually with reference to the heavenly kingdom.¹⁸

Merkle addresses how to discern meaning in Old Testament passages about Israel’s restoration. He says meaning should not be sought “in the actual language,” but “through the actual language”:

The Old Testament presents a vivid and detailed picture of Israel’s future restoration. We have seen, however, that these descriptions are not meant to be taken literally. Although it is true that these predictions and promises have a real meaning, the meaning is not expressed in the actual language, but through the actual language.¹⁹

Merkle also appeals to the concept of “symbolic interpretation”: “There are abundant examples where New Testament authors offer a symbolic interpretation of Old Testament prophecies concerning the nation of Israel.”²⁰ So for Merkle, one must go beyond literal interpretation to symbolic interpretation when it comes to prophecies about Israel.

Merkle’s theory leads to the spiritualization of physical blessings promised in the Old Testament. For instance, Amos 9:13-15 predicts agricultural prosperity and the rebuilding of cities. But for Merkle “nonliteral language” and “figurative language” should be used for this section. Such prosperity is not literal:

For example, all must admit that Amos 9:11–15 uses nonliteral language when the prophet says, “the mountains shall drip sweet wine, and all the hills shall flow with it” (v. 13). Figurative language is used to communicate a reality: God will abundantly bless His people by supplying all their needs. The issue, then, is whether the physical blessing is as a metaphor for the greater spiritual blessings we receive in Christ and His kingdom.²¹

Another non-dispensational hermeneutical tactic involves the concept of vanishing. Marten Woudstra, for instance, believes in the “vanishing” of Old Testament promises concerning Israel. He argues that when the relationship between the testaments is understood

¹⁷ Kim Riddlebarger, *A Case for Amillennialism: Understanding the End Times* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003), 37.

¹⁸ Bruce K. Waltke, “Kingdom Promises as Spiritual,” in *Continuity and Discontinuity: Perspectives on the Relationship between the Old and New Testaments* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1988), 283.

¹⁹ Merkle, “Old Testament Restoration Prophecies Regarding the Nation of Israel: Literal or Symbolic?” 22.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 23.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 22.

correctly, “our concern with an earthly restoration of Israel to the land of the fathers will diminish to the vanishing point.”²²

Dispensational Response

Dispensationalism is committed to applying a consistent literal interpretation to all Scripture. This leads to accepting the importance of physical and tangible entities. Thus, Dispensationalism does not approve of the hermeneutic of spiritualization. This applies to prophetic passages, too. As Roy Zuck states:

Nowhere does Scripture indicate that when we come to prophetic portions of Scripture we should ignore the normal sense of the words and overlook the meanings of words and sentences. The norms of grammatical interpretation should be applied to prophetic as well as to nonprophetic literature.²³

No biblical evidence exists for spiritualizing tangible entities in the Bible. Non-dispensationalists infer things that are not in Scripture. The matters most often spiritualized by non-dispensationalists, like Israel and the land of Israel, are not spiritualized in Scripture. Their significances are taught and reaffirmed. Plus, spiritualizing Scripture means overriding the original meaning found in various texts and all the problems this brings. J. C. Ryle stated correctly that spiritualizing leads to missing the meaning of Scripture:

I believe that the literal sense of the Old Testament prophecies has been far too much neglected by the Churches, and is far too much neglected at the present day, and that under the mistaken system of *spiritualizing* and accommodating Bible language, Christians have too often completely missed its meaning.²⁴

In addition, spiritualizing physical realities seems too close to Platonism and its elevation of the spiritual realm over the material. The Christian worldview, though, affirms the goodness of both physical and spiritual realities. While they are distinct, physical and spiritual realities both are important in God’s purposes, and one does not supersede the other. Dispensationalism, thus, rejects the idea that the Bible spiritualizes physical matters. Both are important in God’s purposes.

²² Marten H. Woudstra, “Israel and the Church: A Case for Continuity,” in *Continuity and Discontinuity: Perspectives on the Relationship between the Old and New Testaments*, ed. John S. Feinberg (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1988), 228.

²³ Roy B. Zuck, *Basic Bible Interpretation: A Practical Guide to Discovering Biblical Truth* (Colorado Springs, CO: ChariotVictor, 1991), 241–42.

²⁴ J. C. Ryle, *Are You Ready For The End Of Time?* (Fearn, Scotland: Christian Focus, 2001), 9; reprint of *Coming Events and Present Duties*, 9.

4. Typological Interpretation

Most Christians recognize the presence of Old Testament entities or “types” that correspond to greater New Testament realities. Adam, for example is a “type” of Jesus in Romans 5:14. The Mosaic Law is a “shadow” of the New Covenant in Hebrews 10:1. The Passover sacrifice of Exodus 12 is a type of Jesus’ sacrifice according to 1 Corinthians 5:7.

Types show patterns and correspondences in God’s purposes. They supplement the Bible’s storyline. But non-dispensationalists sometimes assert that types and typological connections are the primary way to understand the Bible’s storyline. Hank Hanegraaff, for instance, calls typology the “The Golden Key”²⁵ to understanding the Bible. In the book, *Progressive Covenantalism*, a search of words related to “typology” netted 155 uses, showing the heavy reliance on type language for Progressive Covenantalism.²⁶

With non-dispensationalism, typology often is presented as the primary reason to believe Old Testament prophecies will not be fulfilled literally. And typology is used to argue that the Bible’s storyline changes from the Old to the New Testament. Thus, there is discontinuity between Old Testament expectation and New Testament fulfillment. With typology, matters like Israel, land, physical blessings, and other things allegedly are inferior “types” that faded in significance once the New Testament arrived. Robert Strimple, for example, in his presentation of Amillennialism, claims that national Israel, David’s throne, Jerusalem, the land of Canaan, and a structural temple were types that faded into theological non-significance with the coming of Christ:

All evangelical Christians are accustomed to viewing the Old Testament sacrifices and feasts and ceremonies as being types, that is, teaching tools pointing forward to the work of Christ. When then should the elements that we will consider now—the land of Canaan, the city of Jerusalem, the temple, the throne of David, the nation Israel itself—not be understood using the same interpretive insight that we use in interpreting the sacrifices and ceremonies.²⁷

And with regard to any type—whether it be sacrifice, feast, temple, or land—when the reality is introduced, the shadow passes away. And it does not pass away in order to be at some future restored; it passes away because in Jesus Christ it has been fulfilled.”²⁸

The use of types for storyline change is linked with “typological interpretation.” Storms states, “*Typological interpretation* is specifically the interpretation of the Old Testament based on the fundamental theological unity of the two Testaments whereby something in the Old

²⁵ Hank Hanegraaff, *The Apocalypse Code: Find Out What the Bible Really Says About the End Times and Why it Matters Today* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2007), 161.

²⁶ See Stephen J. Wellum and Brent E. Parker, eds., *Progressive Covenantalism: Charting a Course between Dispensational and Covenant Theologies* (Nashville, TN: B&H Academic, 2016). The terms “typology” and “typological” make up most of the approximately 155 references.

²⁷ Strimple, “Amillennialism,” 86.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

shadows, prefigures, adumbrates something in the New.”²⁹ Thus, typological interpretation is a hermeneutical tactic that interprets the Bible through types and typological connections, even if this means overriding the original meaning of explicit Bible texts. For example, O. Palmer Robertson acknowledges that New Covenant promises in the Old Testament involve physical and land promises concerning Israel. But he puts these in the category of “typological” and states there will be “another kind of ‘literal’ fulfillment”:

Some might insist that “literal” fulfillment of new covenant prophecy requires the return of ethnic Israel to a geographically located Palestine. Yet the replacement of the typological with the actual as a principle of biblical interpretation points to another kind of “literal” fulfillment.³⁰

For Robertson, this other kind of literal fulfillment, linked with the “typological,” reveals a change from Old Testament expectation to New Testament fulfillment. Key also here is Robertson’s concept of “replacement” in which there is “the replacement of the typological with the actual.” For him, the idea of a return of ethnic Israel to the land is “replaced.” A biblical truth is taken away. In a similar manner, Karlberg removes a biblical truth because “typological interpretation” allegedly rules out a literal restoration of Israel to the land: “But genuine typological interpretation rules out any additional literal fulfillment of the land promise in a future restoration of national Israel subsequent to or alongside the messianic fulfillment.”³¹ So like Robertson, Karlberg negates a biblical teaching because of the use of “typological interpretation.”

Advocates of typological interpretation go beyond grammatical-historical hermeneutics so that the relationship of the testaments primarily is typological. Instead of viewing types on a case-by-case basis, the Old Testament broadly is viewed as a vast landscape of types and shadows that gives way to superior antitypes and, with it, a new story. There is a journey from the shadows (Old Testament) to reality (New Testament) with the reality looking much different than the “shadows.” And, also, instead of viewing types as supplementing the storyline of the Bible, types are used to change the Bible’s storyline.

Essential to typological interpretation is the belief that the Bible’s storyline primarily is understood by typological connections, not explicit statements in Scripture. Also, the grammatical-historical hermeneutic is perceived as insufficient to fully grasp what God is communicating in Old Testament passages. One must turn also to implications from typological connections.

According to LaRondelle, “More than a historical-grammatical exegesis of isolated parts of Scripture is needed.”³² Instead, the “immediate and wider theological contexts” must take

²⁹ Sam Storms, *Kingdom Come: The Amillennial Alternative* (Geanies House, Fearn, Ross-shire, Scotland, UK, 2013), 38. Emphases in original.

³⁰ O. Palmer Robertson, *The Christ of the Covenants* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1980), 300.

³¹ Mark Karlberg, *Covenant Theology in the Reformed Perspective*, 195.

³² Hans K. LaRondelle, *The Israel of God in Prophecy: Principles of Prophetic Interpretation* (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 1983), 7.

priority.³³ This means reading “the Hebrew Scriptures in the light of the New Testament as a whole.”³⁴

For some who stress typological interpretation, Old Testament texts must be understood within a larger theological framework that leaves the original meanings behind. As Gerhard Von Rad declares:

Typological interpretation will thus in a fundamental way leave the historical self-understanding of the Old Testament texts in question behind, and go beyond it. It sees in the Old Testament facts something in preparation, something sketching itself out, of which the Old Testament witness is not itself aware, because it lies quite beyond its purview.³⁵

Goppelt, too, states that there is more to understanding Old Testament texts than just gathering facts from the grammatical-historical method: “The typological use of the OT in the NT has always provided an example of a more profound interpretation of the OT and has motivated the search for a meaning that goes beyond the literal grammatical-historical explanation.”³⁶ Gentry and Wellum use a typological interpretation approach to argue that dispensationalists are wrong for believing that the land of Israel will be significant in the future:

In the case of dispensational theology, if they viewed as typological both the land of Israel and the nation itself, then their view, at its core, would no longer be valid. Why? For the reason that the land promise would not require a future, “literal” fulfillment in the millennial age; the land itself is a type and pattern of Eden and thus the entire creation, which reaches its fulfillment in the dawning of a new creation. Christ, then, as the antitype of Israel, receives the land promise and fulfills it by his inauguration of a new covenant which is organically linked to the new creation.³⁷

The authors again understand land as a type of “something greater”:

In other words, “land,” when placed within the biblical covenants and viewed diachronically, was intended by God to function as a “type” or “pattern” of something greater, i.e. creation, which is precisely how it is understood in light of the coming of Christ and the inauguration of the new covenant.³⁸

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid., 19.

³⁵ Gerhard Von Rad, “Typological Interpretation of the Old Testament,” in *A Guide to Contemporary Hermeneutics: Major Trends in Biblical Interpretation*, ed. Donald K. McKim, trans. John Bright (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986), 43.

³⁶ Leonhard Goppelt, *Typos: The Typological Interpretation of the Old Testament in the New*, trans. Donald H. Madvig (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982), 7.

³⁷ Peter J. Gentry and Stephen J. Wellum, *Kingdom through Covenant: A Biblical-Theological Understanding of the Covenants* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), 122.

³⁸ Ibid., 706.

Those who hold to typological interpretation sometimes believe God used accommodating language when speaking about Israel and land in the Old Testament. Allegedly, the Old Testament audiences could not grasp coming New Testament realities, so God used Old Covenant language to explain them. Physical, national, and geographical language were used, but the New Testament fulfillments would be spiritual, non-national, and non-geographical. Only with the New Testament do we see what God really meant. As Strimple asserts, “In order to communicate to God’s people still living under the old covenant, the prophets by the Spirit’s inspiration spoke of the blessings God would pour out under the new covenant in terms of the typological images so familiar to the old covenant saints.”³⁹ Storms claims, “the Old Testament author frequently spoke of the future in terms, images, and concepts borrowed from the social and cultural world with which he and his contemporaries were familiar.”⁴⁰ This is because “he likely could not fully grasp how his words would find fulfillment in a distant time and altogether new world transformed by the coming of Christ. . . .”⁴¹ So, supposedly, Old Testament prophets used words that did not really represent what God would do in the future because the human authors and original audiences could not comprehend what God was going to do.

In sum, typological interpretation is used by some to claim predictions about certain Old Testament entities will not be fulfilled literally. If an Old Testament thing is labeled a “type,” then we should not expect it to have future significance. Supposedly, matters such as Israel, land, structural temples, and physical blessings are “types.” Thus, they are lesser realities that are transcended in the New Testament.

Dispensational Response

Dispensationalism accounts for types and their implications. Types and their corresponding antitypes can be discerned by a grammatical-historical hermeneutic since Scripture makes these connections. Types reveal a divine Author behind Scripture who guides history. They also support the storyline revealed through explicit Scripture statements. But dispensationalists do not believe in typological interpretation in which types are used to change the Bible’s narrative. For example, Mark Snoeberger declares, “Typological *interpretation*, however, I cannot accept.”⁴² Types are a biblical reality, but typological interpretation, in which types supposedly change the Bible’s storyline, is not legitimate.

Paul Lee Tan wisely stated, “Do not teach doctrine by types.”⁴³ He is right. The Scripture lays out a storyline in which Israel, Israel’s land, nations, temples, physical blessings, and other tangible matters are important. These realities are affirmed in both testaments. Types in the Bible do not overturn the significance of these.

³⁹ Strimple, “Amillennialism,” 85.

⁴⁰ Storms, *Kingdom Come*, 35.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Mark A. Snoeberger, “Traditional Dispensationalism,” in *Covenantal and Dispensational Theologies*, 159. Emphases in original.

⁴³ See Paul Lee Tan, *The Interpretation of Prophecy* (Dallas, TX: Paul Lee Tan, 2010), 172.

The main issue is not whether types exist because they do. The real issue concerns their significance. Dispensationalists do not think non-dispensationalists correctly understand the implications from types. Non-dispensationalists use types to change the Bible's storyline. They find significances with types that the Bible is not teaching. Non-dispensationalists often use types to remove the importance of biblical entities like national Israel and other tangible entities. But typological connections do not change the Bible's storyline. They also do not transform Old Testament expectations. Blaising notes that we should be skeptical of claims that types establish God's plan:

The critic is right to be suspicious of a claim like this (that types are the means of establishing the divine plan) when the claim is employed to contravene, suppress, or subvert the meaning of explicit covenant promise, and even more so when the NT explicitly repeats and reaffirms the same promise as declared in the covenants of the OT.⁴⁴

Dispensationalists also think non-dispensationalists overstate the existence of types in the Old Testament. Most types and shadows in the Bible involve the Mosaic Law and its elements, which indeed are shadows of the New Covenant. Hebrews 10:1 explicitly states that the "Law" is a "shadow." The Old Testament itself predicted that the New Covenant would replace the Mosaic Covenant (see Jer. 31:31–32). Hebrews shows that Jesus and His New Covenant are better than the Mosaic Covenant. The Old Testament is not a vast land of types and shadows. Covenants like the Abrahamic, Davidic, and New covenants are of a different nature than the Mosaic Covenant. These covenants and their many elements are not types and shadows. Matters like Israel and Israel's land are linked with these covenants of promises. They also are not types. Also, Bible prophecies about events to come including temples, nations, the antichrist, and other events are not types.

Yes, there are types in the Old Testament, but not everything in the Old Testament is a type. Non-dispensationalists often over-infer when it comes to types. They call things "types" that are not types and give implications to types that are not accurate. Mark Snoeberger rightly states, "But the transformation of the OT into a vast complex of foreshadowings, pictures, types, and other semi-predictive devices, the original intentions of which fall away as they are fulfilled in Christ, is, I would contend, hermeneutically peculiar."⁴⁵

Also, the claim that God used accommodating language for the Old Testament audiences because they could not understand or handle what God was revealing is questionable. Are the concepts in prophecies so complex that earlier audiences would have no idea of what God was going to do? We do not think so. Fulfillments in the New Testament are glorious, but they are not complex like calculus or physics. The New Testament states that there are mysteries being revealed that were not made known in Old Testament times (see Eph. 3:5–6), but that is different from saying God led people in earlier eras to believe things He knew would not occur.

⁴⁴ Craig A. Blaising, "A Critique of Gentry and Wellum's, *Kingdom Through Covenant: A Hermeneutical-Theological Response*," *The Master's Seminary Journal* 26.1 (Spring 2015): 117.

⁴⁵ Snoeberger, "A Traditional Dispensational Response," 244.

It is precarious to guess that God meant something different than what He led His prophets to convey. This is something dispensationalists are not willing to do.

Dispensationalism does not believe God promises things He knows will not come true. Galatians 3:15 says that once a covenant is made its conditions cannot be changed. Promises contain an ethical element and the character of the one making the promises is at stake. Blaising notes, “To postulate a ‘fulfillment’ of these covenant promises by means of a reality shift in the thing promised overlooks the performative nature of the word of promise, violates the legitimate expectations of the recipients, and brings the integrity of God into question.”⁴⁶

In sum, Dispensationalism calls for a responsible use of types and their implications and does not agree with the non-dispensational understanding of types and typological interpretation.

5. Storyline Change Language

Non-dispensationalists often assert that certain entities in the Old Testament lose their significance once Jesus arrives. Israel, for example, is redefined from being an ethnic, national, territorial entity to a spiritual community—the church.⁴⁷ The promised land, for some, supposedly became spiritual blessings for the church. David’s throne transitioned from being an earthly throne in Jerusalem to a spiritual throne in heaven. Structural temples lost their significance, too, because temple language is used of Jesus and the church in the New Testament.

This transformation of Old Testament realities from their original understandings results in “storyline change” or what Craig Blaising calls, “a reality shift” in the Bible’s storyline.⁴⁸ Matters such as Israel, Israel’s land, an earthly Davidic throne, and structural temples are presented as significant in the Old Testament. But this supposedly all changes with the New Testament. The story changes—a shift in reality occurs.

The non-dispensational case for storyline change, or reality shift, is linked with “storyline change language.” Storyline change language involves the use of terms that seem to show a change or transformation of the Bible’s storyline from Old Testament to New Testament. Non-dispensationalists sometimes use certain terms to argue that what was expected in Old Testament times should not be expected anymore because the New Testament introduces a transformation. Examples of such language include “redefine,” “reinterpret,” “transform,” “transcend,” “transpose,” etc. These terms are not found in Scripture regarding the Old Testament message, but non-dispensationalists use these words to claim that texts concerning land, physical blessings, Israel, temple, kingdom, David’s throne, and other things should be understood differently now. These matters allegedly are transformed by the New Testament for new realities. This introduces significant discontinuity in the Bible’s storyline.

⁴⁶ Craig A. Blaising, “Israel and Hermeneutics,” in *The People, The Land, and The Future of Israel: Israel and the Jewish People in the Plan of God* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2014), 161.

⁴⁷ Some say Jesus is the true Israel and the church in Jesus becomes “Israel” because of its union with Him. But this is not the logic the Bible uses.

⁴⁸ Blaising, “Israel and Hermeneutics,” 156.

For example, regarding the kingdom of God, Louis Berkhof stated that Jesus “*enlarged and transformed and spiritualized it*.”⁴⁹ For Berkhof, Jesus took the Old Testament idea of the kingdom of God and dramatically changed it. These terms indicate storyline change.

Gary Burge uses “reinterpret” language about land promises: “For as we shall see (and as commentators regularly show) while the land itself had a concrete application for most in Judaism, Jesus and his followers *reinterpreted* the promises that came to those in his kingdom.”⁵⁰ Like Burge, Stephen Sizer believes that “Jesus and the apostles *reinterpreted* the Old Testament.”⁵¹ N. T. Wright uses “redefining” concerning the kingdom: “Jesus spent His whole ministry *redefining* what the kingdom meant. He refused to give up the symbolic language of the kingdom, but filled it with such a new content that, as we have seen, he powerfully subverted Jewish expectations.”⁵² Burge refers to “The land redefined.”⁵³ Colin Chapman sees great discontinuity in the Bible’s storyline because of transformation and reinterpretation:

When seen in the context of the whole Bible, both Old and New Testaments, the promise of the land to Abraham and his descendants does not give anyone a divine right to possess or to live in the land for all time, because the coming of the kingdom of God through Jesus the Messiah has *transformed and reinterpreted* all the promises and prophecies in the OT. God has acted in the land not only to demonstrate his love but also to deal with the root causes of injustice and evil. Jesus the Messiah, who lived, died and was raised from death in the land, has opened the kingdom of God to people of all races, making all who follow him into ‘one new humanity’ (Eph 2:15 NRSV).⁵⁴

G. K. Beale, too, argues that storyline “transformation” occurs from the OT to the NT: “Thus, 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. . . .”⁵⁵ Sounding like N. T. Wright on this issue, Beale says this leads to a kingdom unlike what the OT writers predicted: “Perhaps one of the most striking features of Jesus’ kingdom is that it appears not to be the kind of kingdom prophesied in the OT and expected by Judaism.”⁵⁶ This is strong *discontinuity* language. For Beale, the kingdom of Jesus is not the kingdom that the Old Testament expected. This is storyline change! A reality shift!

⁴⁹ Louis Berkhof, *The Kingdom of God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1951), 13. Emphases mine.

⁵⁰ Gary M. Burge, *Jesus and the Land: The New Testament Challenge to “Holy Land” Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2010), 35. Emphases mine.

⁵¹ Stephen Sizer, *Zion’s Christian Soldiers? The Bible, Israel and the Church* (Nottingham, England: Inter-Varsity Press, 2008), 36. Emphases mine.

⁵² N. T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress Press, 1997), 471. Emphases mine.

⁵³ Burge, 21.

⁵⁴ Colin Chapman, *Whose Promised Land? The Continuing Crisis Over Israel and Palestine* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2002), 285. Emphases mine.

⁵⁵ G. K. Beale, *A New Testament Biblical Theology: The Unfolding of the Old Testament in the New* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011), 6. Emphases mine.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 431.

Wellum and Gentry, the founders of Progressive Covenantalism, use several strategic terms to promote storyline discontinuity. They say, “precisely because Jesus has fulfilled the Old Testament, there is also *massive change* or *discontinuity* from what has preceded, which entails that in Christ an incredible *epochal shift* in redemptive-history has occurred.”⁵⁷ They also claim that because of the coming of Christ and the inauguration of the entire new covenant age, “many of the themes that were basic to the Old Testament have now been *transposed* and *transformed*.”⁵⁸ These are strong terms of discontinuity concerning the Old and New Testaments. Note their terms:

- “massive change”
- “discontinuity”
- “transposed”
- “transformed”

They then quote another author favorably who says, “Eschatology is thereby *transformed*.”⁵⁹ Thus, Progressive Covenantalism believes a great difference exists between Old Testament expectation and New Testament fulfillment.

George Ladd also offers strong reality shift language. Regarding Peter’s understanding of Jesus’ ascension in Acts 2, George Ladd said: “This involves a rather *radical reinterpretation* of the Old Testament prophecies, but no more so than the entire *reinterpretation* of God’s redemptive plan by the early church.”⁶⁰ Consider the dramatic nature of Ladd’s claim. For Ladd, not only are Old Testament prophecies radically reinterpreted but so too is “God’s redemptive plan.” This shows how extensive Ladd holds to storyline change in the Bible. His use of “radical” further shows how discontinuous Ladd views the messages of the Old and New testaments.

In sum, when a scholar uses the following words concerning how the New Testament uses the Old Testament a change of storyline is offered:

- Redefine
- Reinterpret
- Transform
- Transcend
- Transpose
- Spiritualize

As a critic of this storyline change approach, Blaising believes this “reality shift” approach involves “an alternate reality”:

⁵⁷ Gentry and Wellum, *Kingdom through Covenant*, 598. Emphases mine.

⁵⁸ Ibid. Emphases mine.

⁵⁹ Ibid. Emphases mine.

⁶⁰ Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament*, 373. Emphases mine.

But as the story moves to the New Testament, fulfillment takes place in an alternate reality—a different kind of Israel, one that transcends the land, the people, and the nation. This reality shift is from the material, the earthly, the ethnic, to a heavenly, a spiritual, a non-ethnic reality. It moves from a political, national reality to a non-political, universal reality. It changes from a focus on the particular to a universal focus.⁶¹

Dispensational Response

Dispensationalism disagrees with non-dispensationalism's use of storyline change language to introduce a reality shift from Old Testament expectation to New Testament fulfillment. The New Testament does not use reality shift language. It does not speak of redefining, reinterpreting, transforming, or transposing the Old Testament. Theologians may use these terms and concepts, but the New Testament writers and persons do not. Since all Scripture is inspired and harmonizes there is no need for transforming the message of any part of Scripture, including the Old Testament. Dispensationalism believes in great continuity between the testaments. Old Testament revelation is the foundation for the New Testament. The New Testament builds upon the Old. It does not replace the Old or transform it.

Using storyline change language alters God's revelation without biblical support. Dispensationalism is not willing to do this. If God is changing the storyline of the Old Testament there needs to be clear statements He is doing so. As Blaising states, "It is reasonable to assume that if there were to be any change in God's plan, it would be revealed verbally by explicit divine declaration, in like manner as the plan was originally revealed."⁶² But such explicit divine declaration does not occur.

Barry Horner is correct when he states that "the hermeneutic of reinterpretation and transference is illegitimate, which takes the adapted quotation of the OT in the NT to be justification for nullifying the literal interpretation of that same OT passage."⁶³ This is the case because "it not only ignores a fundamental, Hebrew hermeneutical frame of reference, but it also brings about a serious distortion of meaning, especially where the eschatological message of the Prophets is concerned."⁶⁴ Summing up the dispensational rebuttal to the idea of "reinterpretation," David Turner states:

At exactly this point dispensationalists part company with covenant theologians. It is their contention that the NT supplies no "reinterpretation" of OT prophecy which would cancel the OT promises to Israel of a future historical kingdom. In their view the NT use of the OT does not radically modify the OT promises to Israel.⁶⁵

⁶¹ Blaising, "Israel and Hermeneutics," 156.

⁶² Blaising, "A Critique of Gentry and Wellum's, *Kingdom Through Covenant: A Hermeneutical-Theological Response*," 116.

⁶³ Barry E. Horner, *Future Israel: Why Christian Anti-Judaism Must Be Challenged* (Nashville, TN: B&H Academic, 2007), 185.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ David L. Turner, "The Continuity of Scripture and Eschatology: Key Hermeneutical Issues," *Grace Theological Journal* 6.2 (1985): 279.

6. Jesus as “Fulfillment” Means Transforming Old Testament Expectations

Old Testament prophecies involve a wide variety of matters. In addition to messianic prophecies about Jesus, Israel is the subject of many prophecies both for judgment and blessings, and for dispersion and restoration. There also are many prophecies involving the land of Israel and Jerusalem. In addition, there are predictions about Gentile nations and cities. Various prophecies exist concerning the restoration of earth and land, and matters like agricultural prosperity, harmony in the animal kingdom, the building of houses, etc. Also, there are prophecies about temples and events like the Abomination of Desolation, the Day of the Lord, the actions of the antichrist, and descendants of David reigning from David’s throne.

While dispensationalists look for the literal fulfillment of all prophecies, non-dispensationalists do not. Non-dispensationalists often use the idea of “Jesus as fulfillment of the Old Testament” to argue that details of Old Testament prophecies will not be fulfilled literally. This includes prophecies about Israel, land, and other issues. Allegedly, if Jesus is the fulfillment of the Old Testament, then details of Old Testament prophecies about Israel and other matters will not be fulfilled literally. They become “transformed” by or “dissolved” into Jesus somehow.

For example, Goldsworthy links transformation of the Old Testament with Jesus: “For the New Testament the interpretation of the Old Testament is not ‘literal’ but ‘Christological’. That is to say that the coming of the Christ transforms all the Kingdom terms of the Old Testament into gospel reality.”⁶⁶ Thus, for Goldsworthy, “Christological” interpretation means transformation of all kingdom terms of the Old Testament because of Jesus. The implication is that there is no need for a literal fulfillment of those things. Robert Strimple claims that because of Jesus “. . . fulfillment may transcend the terms in which a promise is presented.”⁶⁷

Gary Burge argues against a literal fulfillment of land promises to Israel because of the person of Jesus. He says: “*Divine space is now no longer located in a place but in a person.*”⁶⁸ Note that Burge says, “divine space,” regarding a geographical locale can have its significance transcended in Jesus. Also, concerning John 15, Burge says, “In a word, *Jesus spiritualizes the land.*”⁶⁹ In addition, Burge talks about a “theology of reversal”: “In the synoptic Gospels, the land is enveloped into Jesus’ theology of reversal.”⁷⁰ Burge then appeals to a replacement/fulfillment theology: “In the Fourth Gospel, the land is subsumed within John’s theology of Christological replacement/fulfillment.”⁷¹ Stephen Sizer believes Old Testament prophetic passages are *reinterpreted* or *annulled* through Jesus: “It [Christian Zionism]

⁶⁶ Goldsworthy, *Gospel and Kingdom*, 88.

⁶⁷ Strimple, “Amillennialism,” 99.

⁶⁸ Burge, *Jesus and the Land*, 52. Emphases in original.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 56. Emphases in original.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 57.

ignores, marginalizes, or bypasses New Testament passages that *reinterpreted, annul, or describe the fulfillment of these promises in and through Jesus Christ.*”⁷²

Kim Riddlebarger argues against literal fulfillment of Old Testament physical promises to the nation Israel based on Christ being the “true Israel”: “The New Testament writers claimed that Jesus was *the true Israel of God* and the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecies. So what remains of the dispensationalists’ case that these prophecies will yet be fulfilled in a future millennium? *They vanish in Jesus Christ, who has fulfilled them.*”⁷³ For Riddlebarger, the coming of Jesus as “the true Israel of God” means that prophecies related to a future millennium “vanish.”

Using similar language, Karlberg believes statements about Israel’s kingdom will be “dissolved”: “In that day the typological phenomenon of the ancient Israelite theocracy would be dissolved into the antitypical reality of the Church as the New Israel.”⁷⁴ Vern S. Poythress asserts that Israel of the Old Testament experiences a “transformation” because of Jesus:

Because Christ is an Israelite and Christians are in union with Christ, Christians partake of the benefits promised to Israel and Judah in Jeremiah. With whom is the new covenant made? It is made with Israel and Judah. Hence it is made with Christians by virtue of Christ the Israelite. *Thus one might say that Israel and Judah themselves undergo a transformation at the first coming of Christ, because Christ is the final, supremely faithful Israelite. Around him all true Israel gathers.*⁷⁵

The recent system of Progressive Covenantalism asserts that Jesus’ role as “true Israel” and the idea of “antitypical fulfillment of Israel” means that a literal fulfillment of land promises to Israel is no longer necessary. For example, Brent Parker states, “Jesus is the ‘true Israel’ in that he typologically fulfills all that the nation of Israel anticipated and hoped for.”⁷⁶ Wellum claims, “Jesus is the antitypical fulfillment of Israel and Adam, and in him, all of God’s promises are fulfilled for his people, including the land promise realized in the new creation (Rom. 4:13; Eph 6:3. . .).”⁷⁷

As these quotes show, non-dispensationalists believe Jesus “fulfills” the Old Testament in a way that transforms the original Old Testament expectations. Old Testament entities lose their theological significance because of Jesus. But is this the right approach?

⁷² Stephen Sizer, “Modern Israel in Bible Prophecy: Promised Return or Impending Exile?” <http://www.equip.org/article/modern-israel-in-bible-prophecy-promised-return-or-impending-exile/>. July 3, 2012. Accessed 1/14/2020. Emphases added.

⁷³ Riddlebarger, *A Case for Amillennialism*, 70. Emphases mine.

⁷⁴ Mark W. Karlberg, “The Significance of Israel in Biblical Typology,” in *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 31.3 (1988): 267.

⁷⁵ Vern S. Poythress, *Understanding Dispensationalists* (Phillipsburg: P&R, 1994), 106. Emphases mine.

⁷⁶ Brent E. Parker, “The Israel-Christ-Church Relationship,” in *Progressive Covenantalism: Charting a Course between Dispensational and Covenant Theologies* (Nashville, TN: B&H Academic, 2016), 44–45.

⁷⁷ Stephen J. Wellum, *Covenantal and Dispensational Theologies: Four Views on the Continuity of Scripture*, eds. Brent E. Parker and Richard J. Lucas (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2022), 76.

Dispensational Response

Dispensationalism believes the non-dispensational view of fulfillment in Jesus is not accurate. Yes, Jesus fulfills the Old Testament but not in the way non-dispensationalists claim. Fulfillment in Jesus does not mean Old Testament prophetic details vanish, dissolve, or evaporate. No biblical support exists for this idea. The New Testament writers do not apply a mystical, metaphysical personalism hermeneutic concerning Jesus that makes details of Bible prophecies evaporate into Him.

The Christian worldview asserts distinctions between persons and things. These retain their identities and significances and should not be confused. Matters like corporate Israel, nations, land, earthly kingdom, and physical blessings are not Jesus, but they are related to Jesus. We should understand how everything relates to Jesus without assuming all things disappear or metaphysically collapse into Him. A prediction about a particular person, thing, or event must occur with that person, thing, or event. Predictions about Egypt and Assyria in Isaiah 19 must occur. Predictions about the activities of the coming antichrist must happen as predicted (see Dan. 9:27; 11:36–45).

The fulfillment of all things in Jesus also involves the literal fulfillment of prophecies about Israel. Jesus is the corporate Head of Israel who restores the nation, as Isaiah 49:1–6 reveals. With this text, Jesus, the ultimate Servant of Israel, will save and restore the nation Israel and bring blessings to Gentiles. He does not make national Israel irrelevant. Saucy correctly notes, “Thus, the fact that Christ is the fulfillment of national Israel’s covenant promises cannot be said to necessarily lead to the conclusion that national Israel has no further participation in the fulfillment of those promises.”⁷⁸

The non-dispensational view rightly grasps that Jesus fulfills the Old Testament, but it wrongly infers what this fulfillment means. The non-dispensational view introduces a mystical or metaphysical personalism that merges things that are not Jesus into Jesus. Blaising makes this point concerning Progressive Covenantalism:

KTC [*Kingdom Through Covenant*], at times, reads the Person of Christ as Himself the mystical consummation of the whole narrative. He personally is the fulfillment of Israel, the land, the nation, the church, the creation. The result is a vague mysticism that looks somewhat like a variant of metaphysical Personalism.⁷⁹

Also, Saucy rightly notes that the idea Israel’s land promises are fulfilled in Jesus confuses *Jesus as a person with land as place* where humans live:

[T]he idea that the land promise is fulfilled in the person of Christ seems to deny the physical, material nature of the human being. To be sure, all true worship is in Christ, in

⁷⁸ Robert L. Saucy, “Is Christ the Fulfillment of National Israel’s Prophecies? Yes and No!” in *Master’s Seminary Journal* 28.1 (Spring 2017): 28.

⁷⁹ Blaising, “A Critique of Gentry and Wellum’s, *Kingdom Through Covenant: A Hermeneutical-Theological Response*,” 124.

whom we live, and we can worship him in any place. But as bodied entities, we do worship him in a place. If, as is acknowledged . . . the new creation is an actual space where we worship God, then it is surely possible to see Israel restored to the land, and an actual Jerusalem with a temple where peoples come to worship, as the prophecies portray.⁸⁰

In Romans 9–11, both the corporate entity of Israel *and* Jesus, the ultimate Israelite, are related yet distinguished. Jesus comes from Israel (see Rom. 9:4–5) and is the Deliver who comes from Zion (see Rom. 11:26). Yet “all Israel”, i.e., the corporate entity of Israel, “will be saved” by this Deliverer and experience New Covenant blessings (see Rom. 11:26–27). The ultimate and perfect Israelite, Jesus, saves the corporate entity of Israel. Thus, Israel and Jesus are significant concurrently.

In sum, the non-dispensational view misunderstands what Jesus as fulfillment of the Old Testament means. Fulfillment in Jesus does not mean absorb, transform, or vanish. Instead, Jesus is the means for the literal fulfillment of Old Testament prophecies. Saucy rightly states, “The truth that all the promises are fulfilled in Christ does not, as some say, dissolve their meaning into the person of Christ.”⁸¹

7. Emphasis on First Coming Fulfillment

Dispensationalism emphasizes Jesus’ first *and* second comings for the fulfillment of God’s prophecies, covenants, and promises in the Old Testament. Both comings are infinitely important. However, a non-dispensational approach sometimes emphasizes first coming fulfillment over second coming fulfillment. For example, Graeme Goldsworthy asserts that “ALL prophecy” was fulfilled with Jesus’ first coming:

I want to assert categorically that ALL prophecy was fulfilled in the gospel event at the first coming of Jesus. . . . There is a tendency to try to differentiate Old Testament prophecies of the end into two groups, those applying to the first coming and those applying to the second coming. This is a mistake. A more biblical perspective is one that recognizes that the distinction between the first and second coming is not what happens but in how it happens. Nothing will happen at the return of Christ that has not already happened in him at his first coming.⁸²

In a similar way, Bandy and Merkle state, “All of God’s promises given in the Old Testament are primarily fulfilled in Jesus’ first coming.”⁸³

⁸⁰ Robert L. Saucy, “Response by Robert L. Saucy,” in *Perspectives on Israel and the Church*, ed. Chad O. Brand (Nashville, TN: B&H Academic, 2015), 295.

⁸¹ Robert L. Saucy, *The Case for Progressive Dispensationalism: The Interface Between Dispensational & Non-Dispensational Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1993), 32.

⁸² Graeme Goldsworthy, *Preaching the Whole Bible as Christian Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 93. Alan S. Bandy and Benjamin L. Merkle, *Understanding Prophecy: A Biblical-Theological Approach* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2015), 82.

⁸³ Alan S. Bandy and Benjamin L. Merkle, *Understanding Prophecy: A Biblical-Theological Approach* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2015), 82.

Merkle also argues that interpreting Old Testament prophecies about Israel literally minimizes the work of Christ. Allegedly, if one looks to the future for fulfillment of prophecies concerning Israel one minimizes Jesus' death and resurrection:

One of the problems with interpreting Old Testament prophecies regarding the nation of Israel in a literal manner is that it tends to minimize the work of Christ, especially His suffering, death, and resurrection. How is this so? The New Testament teaches that the death and resurrection of Christ are the climax of God's work in redemptive history. But if we interpret the many Old Testament restoration prophecies regarding the nation of Israel literally, then we are forced to say that such prophecies do not find their fulfillment in God's greatest work. Instead, the first coming of Christ becomes ignored and all attention shifts to Christ's second coming and the millennial kingdom.⁸⁴

For Merkle, believing in a future literal fulfillment of Old Testament prophecies about Israel means shifting all attention to Jesus' second coming which then means Jesus' first coming becomes minimized.

Sam Storms believes the fulfillment of Israel's prophetic hope is Jesus and the church that Jesus established at His first coming, which is the "terminating point of all prophecy":

The central and controlling thesis that I believe is warranted by the biblical text is that the fulfillment of Israel's prophetic hope as portrayed in the Old Testament documents is found in the person and work of Jesus Christ and the believing remnant, the Church, which he established at his first coming. The point is that Jesus Christ and his Church are the focal and terminating point of all prophecy.⁸⁵

Dispensational Response

Dispensationalism does not believe in pitting first and second coming fulfillments against each other as if we have to embrace one as more foundational than the other. Both are infinitely important. Anticipating fulfillments with Jesus' second coming does not detract from the great significance of fulfillments with Jesus' first coming. Likewise, contemplating the cross does not detract from the great truths involved with Jesus' return. We can celebrate the wonderful realities associated with both.

Goldsworthy's claim that all prophecy was fulfilled with Jesus' first coming is wrong. Several prophecies still need to be fulfilled in connection with Jesus' second advent. We are not saying Goldsworthy is a full preterist, but his words sound much like full preterism and its discredited view that all Bible prophecy was fulfilled in the first century AD. Prophecies concerning resurrection, renewal of earth, the Day of the Lord, the antichrist, an earthly kingdom, judgments, and other matters still need to happen. For example, in 2 Thessalonians

⁸⁴ Merkle, "Old Testament Restoration Prophecies Regarding the Nation of Israel: Literal or Symbolic?" 21.

⁸⁵ Storms, *Kingdom Come*, 16.

2:1–4, Paul declared the Day of the Lord had not occurred yet since the apostasy and the revealing of the man of lawlessness (the antichrist) had not happened yet. Even after Jesus' first coming, Paul viewed the Day of the Lord as a future event. Likewise, in 2 Peter 3, Peter referred to a coming "day of the Lord" and a future "new heavens and a new earth" (3:10–13). Everything was not fulfilled with Jesus' first coming. Traditional Christianity affirms two bodily returns of Jesus to earth and that prophecies are related to both.

Merkle's claim that one minimizes the death and resurrection of Christ if one believes restoration prophecies about Israel will be fulfilled in the future also is puzzling. Fortunately, most non-dispensationalists do not use this type of reasoning. Anticipating future fulfillment of some Bible prophecies, including those about Israel, does not minimize anything. God's purposes are complex and occur over time, so we do not have to focus on only one stage of fulfillment. Atonement and redemption were accomplished with Jesus' first coming. And a successful kingdom reign over all nations (including Israel) and the earth will happen at Jesus' second coming. In Acts 3:18–21, Peter said Jesus already fulfilled prophetic passages about His suffering, but Peter also pointed to the future when Jesus will come again and restore all things.

According to Zechariah 12:10, at the time of national Israel's salvation and deliverance, Israel will "look on Him whom they have pierced [Jesus] and mourn for Him." Israel's salvation, near the time of Jesus' second coming, is linked with Israel's realization that Jesus died for the nation at His first coming. The basis for the salvation and restoration of Israel is Jesus who died for the sins of Israel (see Isaiah 53).⁸⁶

We need a both/and approach when it comes to fulfillment and Jesus' two advents. Either/or thinking can lead to a false dichotomy between the importance of the two advents. One can look forward to the restoration of national Israel *and* appreciate all Jesus accomplished with His first advent. We can also rightly grasp that Jesus' death directly relates to the future fulfillment of yet unfulfilled prophecies. If Jesus did not suffer, die, and rise, there would not be a second coming or resurrection of the dead. There would be no future salvation and restoration of Israel. There would be no millennial kingdom or new heavens and new earth.

Also, Merkle's theory should be tested with other prophecies beyond those involving Israel's restoration. As mentioned, there are unfulfilled prophecies concerning resurrections, the renewal of planet earth, judgments, and many other future matters. Does believing these events will be fulfilled minimize the death of Jesus? Of course not. So why should believing in a future fulfillment of restoration prophecies about Israel minimize Jesus' death? Expecting something to be fulfilled in the future, including prophecies about Israel, does not mean one minimizes the cross of Christ.

Next, Storms claimed that all of Israel's prophetic hope is found with Jesus and the church Jesus established at His first coming, which is the terminating point of all prophecy.⁸⁷ We find Storms' point asserted but not proven. The fact that the New Testament itself mentions many

⁸⁶ This Servant of Israel who dies for Israel also dies for Gentiles since He will "sprinkle many nations" with His atoning death (Isa. 52:15).

⁸⁷ Storms acknowledges important events will occur with Jesus' second coming.

prophecies that still need to be fulfilled shows that the first arrival of Christ was not the “terminating point of all prophecy.” The first coming fulfills many Old Testament prophecies and it is related to prophecies that will be fulfilled later. So it is extremely important. But we cannot arbitrarily declare that Jesus’ first coming is the terminating point of all prophecy or all prophecy concerning Israel’s hope. Jesus does not say this. The apostles do not claim this. The biblical data simply does not support this. Storms’ assertion wrongly makes the Bible student choose between the importance of the two comings of Jesus when this is not necessary.

Dispensationalism believes Christians should embrace both advents of Jesus and their significances. Claiming one coming is more climactic is not profitable. The cross is the climax of God’s redemptive plans, *and* Jesus’ death sets the stage for the fulfillment of major events connected with Jesus’ return. The same Jesus who purchased His people with His blood (see Rev. 5:9), will also unleash the Day of the Lord that leads to His return and earthly kingdom (see Rev. 5:10; 6:1ff.). Cross and kingdom work in perfect harmony.

Conclusion

As seen from the above discussion there are seven interpretive assumptions often associated with non-dispensationalism: (1) New Testament Priority over the Old Testament; (2) Nonliteral Fulfillments of Old Testament Prophecies; (3) Spiritualization; (4) Typological Interpretation; (5) Storyline Change Language; (6) Jesus as “Fulfillment” Means Transforming Old Testament Expectations; and (7) Emphasis on First Coming Fulfillment. Understanding these helps with grasping why non-dispensationalists believe the theological views they do and how these contrast with Dispensationalism.

