

POSTMODERN HERMENEUTICS AND BIBLE PROPHECY

Robert L. Thomas
The Master's Seminary

I am not a prophet or the son of a prophet, but it takes no prophet to predict what has happened in recent evangelicalism when the prevailing new evangelical hermeneutical procedures are implemented. I recently wrote,

[N]ew chapters [of this book] will be necessary as new doctrinal systems emerge from innovative opinions about what people think the Bible should say. The new hermeneutics provide no stopping points to limit the extremes to which individual personal inclinations may go in fostering new teachings allegedly derived from Scripture. . . . Predicting what new system of doctrine will arise next is beyond one's wildest imagination. Today's systems of hermeneutics offer no controls on personal preferences. With the new hermeneutics, biblical interpretation degenerates into a contest of my preunderstanding versus your preunderstanding.¹

Present interpretive phenomena among evangelicals are the fruit of postmodernism's effect on contemporary culture in general and contemporary evangelicalism in particular. To itemize the massive impacts of postmodernism—another name for deconstructionism²—on evangelical

¹Robert L. Thomas, *Evangelical Hermeneutics: The New Versus the Old* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2002) 508.

²According to Wikopedia, “deconstructionism” is “a term tied very closely to postmodernism, deconstructionism is a challenge to the attempt to establish any ultimate or secure meaning in a text. Basing itself in language analysis, it seeks to “deconstruct” the ideological biases (gender, racial, economic, political, cultural) and traditional assumptions that infect all histories, as well as philosophical and religious “truths.” Deconstructionism is based on the premise that much of human history, in trying to understand, and then define, reality has led to various forms of domination - of nature, of people of color, of the poor, of homosexuals, etc. Like postmodernism, deconstructionism finds concrete experience more valid than abstract ideas and, therefore, refutes any attempts to produce a history, or a truth. In other words, the multiplicities and contingencies of human experience necessarily bring knowledge down to the local and specific level, and challenge the tendency to centralize power through the claims of an ultimate truth which must be accepted or obeyed by all” (online at <http://www.pbs.org/faithandreason/gengloss/decon-body.html>, accessed 11/20/06).

Wikopedia defines “postmodernism” as follows: “A general and wide-ranging term which is applied to literature, art, philosophy, architecture, fiction, and cultural and literary criticism, among others. Postmodernism is largely a reaction to the assumed certainty of scientific, or objective, efforts to explain reality. In essence, it stems from a recognition that reality is not simply mirrored in human understanding of it, but rather, is constructed as the mind

treatments of Bible prophecy is far beyond the scope of our assignment in this paper. Postmodernism or deconstructionism denies the existence of absolute truth that is discoverable by rational treatment of the content of the Bible. Its impact is so all-encompassing that in the space allotted to us we can only observe its blurring of distinctions and isolate certain symptoms of the postmodern influence in beclouding what the Bible actually says about the future.

POSTMODERN BLUR OF THE RATIONALITY AND PRECISION OF SCRIPTURE

A Leading Character: Ernest R. Sandeen

In our postmodern climate, the words “rationality” and “precision” have come under an attack of the severest sort. The campaign endorsed by a number of evangelicals bears a remarkable similarity to one initiated by E. R. Sandeen three or four decades ago. Why such a battle continues to arise is a deep mystery, because the foundations laid for discrediting the so-called Scottish Common Sense Realism of the Princeton movement have themselves been so thoroughly discredited. The work of Sandeen on fundamentalism³ has received much attention, both from those who buy into his theory partially or totally and from those who have shown the grievous shortcomings of his theory. Sandeen contended, “Most twentieth-century Fundamentalists and many twentieth-century historians have mistakenly assumed that Protestantism possessed a strong, fully integrated theology of biblical authority which was attacked by advocates of the higher criticism. As we shall see, no such theology existed before 1850.”⁴ He developed a theory that the millenarian—more commonly known today as dispensational premillenarian—literal method of interpretation of Scripture was essentially the same as that introduced into evangelicalism through the Princeton doctrine of the Scriptures, and concluded, “Both Princeton and the millenarians had staked their entire conception of Christianity upon a particular view of the Bible based ultimately upon eighteenth-century [i.e.,

tries to understand its own particular and personal reality. For this reason, postmodernism is highly skeptical of explanations which claim to be valid for all groups, cultures, traditions, or races, and instead focuses on the relative truths of each person. In the postmodern understanding, interpretation is everything; reality only comes into being through our interpretations of what the world means to us individually. Postmodernism relies on concrete experience over abstract principles, knowing always that the outcome of one's own experience will necessarily be fallible and relative, rather than certain and universal. Postmodernism is ‘post’ because it denies the existence of any ultimate principles, and it lacks the optimism of there being a scientific, philosophical, or religious truth which will explain everything for everybody - a characteristic of the so-called ‘modern’ mind” (online at <http://www.pbs.org/faithandreason/gengloss/postm-body.html>, accessed 11/20/06).

³Ernest R. Sandeen, *The Roots of Fundamentalism: British and American Millenarianism 1800–1930* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970).

⁴Ibid., 106.

Enlightenment] standards of rationality.”⁵

In the process of developing his theory, Sandeen raised three objections to conclusions of the Princeton theologians: their doctrine of verbal inspiration, their doctrine of biblical inerrancy, and their view that inspiration applied only to the original autographs.⁶

That such doctrines based on rational thought did not exist until the late nineteenth century has been soundly refuted a number of times since Sandeen published his work in 1970. Woodbridge and Balmer have shown that Sandeen’s version of the history of biblical authority in the Reformed tradition is misconstrued, that his portrait of the doctrine of biblical authority at nineteenth-century Princeton Theological Seminary is misleading, and that his separation of the Princetonians’ teachings about the infallibility of the original autographs from the wider context of American and European evangelical thought is erroneous.⁷ Contrary to Sandeen’s theory, William Whitaker in a 1588 publication and William Ames in 1624, 1627, and 1629 publications defended a Reformed position of biblical inerrancy.⁸ Nineteenth-century Princetonians did not play a major role in formulating the doctrine of inerrancy in the original autographs, and they did not neglect the role of the Holy Spirit as Sandeen contended. Rather non-Presbyterian scholars are the ones who exerted major influence in this area.

Furthermore, Princetonians such as Charles Hodge did recognize the role of the Holy Spirit in attesting the authority of Scripture.⁹ Princeton’s position on the inerrancy of the original autographs was not innovative as Sandeen contended, but rather reflected a wider context of Reformed thought and the position of other Christian communions from Augustine to Calvin to Whitaker to Ames.¹⁰ On the basis of so much misinformation in Sandeen’s work, Woodbridge and Balmer call for a thorough revision of Sandeen’s work because of the way it has misled so many people.¹¹

Ronald F. Satta follows a different path in demonstrating the fallacious theory defended by Sandeen, the theory which included the proposal that the evangelical community in America truly possessed no well-defined doctrine of bibliology—including inerrancy—until the later stages

⁵Ibid., 131. According to Sandeen, Charles Hodge and Princeton Seminary “produced a wooden, mechanical discipline as well as a rigorously logical one” that did not allow the witness of the Spirit to play an important role in biblical interpretation (ibid., 118).

⁶Ibid., 123-30.

⁷John D. Woodbridge and Randall H. Balmer, *The Princetonians and Biblical Authority: An Assessment of the Ernest Sandeen Proposal*, in *Scripture and Truth*, eds. D. A. Carson and John D. Woodbridge (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1983) 254.

⁸Ibid., 254-58.

⁹Ibid., 258-71.

¹⁰Ibid., 271-76.

¹¹Ibid., 277-79.

of the nineteenth century.¹² He responds to the three major complaints of Sandeen against Charles Hodge and B. B. Warfield, the first of which pertains to verbal inspiration. Sandeen held the doctrine teaching that the very words were inspired was nascent, but Satta shows conclusively that the doctrine was ancient, extending all the way back to the early fathers.¹³ Next, Satta responds to Sandeen's contention that later Princeton scholars altered the emphasis of Charles Hodge's theology when they taught that the inspiration of the Bible depended on inerrancy.¹⁴ Here he shows that, contrary to Sandeen, Hodge used the terms "infallible" and "inerrant" interchangeably, meaning that Hodge's successors merely continued the teaching of their mentor.¹⁵ Sandeen's third alleged innovation by Princeton Seminary was to focus on the non-extant original autographs so that no one could ever prove the existence of an error in Scripture.¹⁶ Satta responds to this aspect of Sandeen's accusation by five observations: (1) this theory confuses preservation of the text with its inspiration; (2) Hodge and Warfield would not have appealed to this phenomenon if it was really new; (3) this focus on the autograph was vital to their defense of Scripture; (4) if this was a calculated "dodge" by Princetonians, it would not leave the Bible impregnable to attack; (5) inspiration of the autograph was not new to Reformed theology.¹⁷

Sandeen concludes this section of his discussion with an interesting statement:

Both conservatives and liberals worked at the theological task, but the Princeton professors' insistence that they were doing nothing new, while creating a unique apologetic which flew in the face of the standards they were claiming to protect, cannot be judged as a historically honest or laudable program.¹⁸

This is a classic example of the pot calling the kettle black. If anyone has distorted historical data and cannot be judged as "historically honest or laudable," it is Sandeen. That is why it is inexplicable that so many contemporary evangelicals for support of their hermeneutical escapades are looking to Sandeen's theory about the invention of rationalism through installing Scottish Common Sense Realism at Princeton Seminary in the middle-to-late 1800s.

¹²Ronald F. Satta, "Fundamentalism and Inerrancy: A Response to the Sandeen Challenge," *Evangelical Journal* 21/2 (Fall 2003):66-80.

¹³*Ibid.*, 67-70; cf. Sandeen, *Roots of Fundamentalism* 123-25.

¹⁴Cf. Sandeen, *Roots of Fundamentalism* 125-27.

¹⁵Satta, "Fundamentalism and Inerrancy" 70-75.

¹⁶Sandeen, *Roots of Fundamentalism* 127-30.

¹⁷Satta, "Fundamentalism and Inerrancy" 75-77.

¹⁸Sandeen, *Roots of Fundamentalism* 130.

Examples of Sandeen's Influence: the Sandeenists

J. B. Rogers and D. K. McKim

Despite his “at best” careless or “at worst” dishonest handling of historical data, Ernest R. Sandeen has become a hero to numbers of well-known writers. J. B. Rogers and D. K. McKim refer to his work frequently in their discussions of the authority and interpretation of the Bible. Like Sandeen, they trace the doctrine of the scientific inerrancy of the Bible to Princeton, specifically to John Witherspoon who became president of the College of New Jersey—an earlier name for Princeton College.¹⁹ Witherspoon began a conservative tradition that was very influential in America, they say, and commended “Scottish common sense philosophy as rationally more acceptable” than rationalistic deism.²⁰ “Witherspoon had unbounded confidence in human reason,” they write.²¹ He held that reason and Scripture were always in harmony with the principles of Scottish realism.²² Witherspoon’s influence continued when Princeton Seminary was founded.²³

Rogers and McKim parrot much of the same perspective as Sandeen when dealing with Charles Hodge.²⁴ They portray Hodge as constantly changing his position on matters of inspiration because of opposing scientific theories that arose, theories such as Darwinianism. Their concurrence with Sandeen’s approach surfaces when they cite his works regarding Archibald Alexander’s emphasis on the importance of reason in combating deism.²⁵ They also cite him extensively, stating that Hodge was wrong when claiming that Princeton theology offered nothing new regarding the doctrine of inspiration that had not been held since the beginning of Christianity.²⁶ They cite Sandeen again in criticism of Warfield’s definition of his inductive approach.²⁷ Either intentionally or unintentionally, Rogers and McKim have used the work of a discredited historian as—at least in part—foundational for their own position, thereby discrediting themselves also.

G. M. Marsden

G. M. Marsden has relied heavily on Sandeen’s work in his attempt to define fundamentalism.²⁸ Basically, he approves of Sandeen’s historical analysis of late nineteenth-

¹⁹Jack B. Rogers and Donald K. McKim, *The Authority and Interpretation of the Bible: An Historical Approach* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1979) 244.

²⁰*Ibid.*, 245.

²¹*Ibid.*

²²*Ibid.*, 246.

²³*Ibid.*, 245.

²⁴*Ibid.*, 285-89.

²⁵*Ibid.*, 311-12 nn. 38, 39.

²⁶*Ibid.*, 314-15 n. 89.

²⁷*Ibid.*, 375-67 n. 221. Sandeen’s words are as cited in connection with n. 22 above.

²⁸George M. Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture: The Shaping of Twentieth Century Evangelicalism: 1870-1925* (New York: Oxford University, 1980).

century developments regarding the inspiration of the Bible.²⁹ Marsden cites Sandeen frequently, portraying his work in a positive light almost exclusively though sometimes differing with him on lesser points. He concurs with him in allowing the strong influence of common sense philosophy on views of inspiration at Princeton and regarding the role of the reaction against deism, Darwinianism, and other outgrowths of the Enlightenment as the causes of those views.³⁰ Never, however, does he directly point out Sandeen's radical misuse of historical data.

James Barr

Another who fell victim to the influence of Sandeen is James Barr. Sandeen's influence on Barr is reflected in Barr's statement, "Sandeen argues, to me convincingly, that the fundamentalist leadership came from exactly the same social groups as the liberal leadership came from."³¹ This is one of Barr's repeated references to Sandeen's work. Regarding the doctrinal stream of fundamentalism, Barr writes, "It is a reasonable comment, therefore, to say that the fundamentalist conception of truth is dominated by a materialistic view, derived from a scientific age. This stress on the accuracy of the Bible in its *material-physical* reporting separates modern fundamentalism entirely from the older theology, such as the theology of Luther and Calvin, which it ill-informedly claims as its own forebear. It is possible to argue further that the chief doctrinal stream accepted in fundamentalism, the Princeton theology of the Hodges and Warfield, took its method expressly from the analogy of natural science, and that natural science as seen in a traditional Newtonian mould."³² He adds, "They [i.e., conservative evangelicals] have no right to shrug off Ramm unless they are prepared to alter the doctrines of scripture and principles of interpretation upon which Ramm's reasoning is based and which he is logically following out. Conservative evangelicals have to face the fact: by the doctrines of inerrancy and methods of interpretation upon which they insist, they are bound if they are honest to come up against exactly these questions."³³ Regarding fundamentalism's view of Scripture, Barr opines, "[T]he fundamentalist position has not been a non-philosophical or anti-philosophical one, but one built upon a strong and clear philosophical position, in which a very powerful, indeed a practically unlimited, role was accorded to reason in the vital matter of biblical interpretation."³⁴

Mark Noll

Another follower of Sandeen is Mark Noll. Noll writes, "Critics of Scottish Common Sense Philosophy regularly condemn its advocates for being naive, for—that is—failing to recognize how thoroughly all human perceptions, even those of Scripture, are colored by local

²⁹E.g., "Sandeen's thesis has much to recommend it and his impressive study remains valuable. He is certainly correct in supposing that millenarianism and Princeton theology are two of the important keys for understanding fundamentalism" (ibid., 5).

³⁰Ibid., 16-18.

³¹James Barr, *Fundamentalism* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1978) 91.

³²Ibid. 93.

³³Ibid., 97.

³⁴Ibid., 274-75.

cultural circumstances.”³⁵ Noll apparently concurs with this criticism. He adds, “[T]he Princetonians, as much as they sometimes appeared to deny it, were in fact children of their time, participating in the grand intellectual movements of their day.”³⁶ Regarding the rift between fundamentalism and the Princeton theology, Noll opines, “Fundamentalists believed in the Bible, Modernists in reason, but the Princeton theologians had believed in both. . . . In sum, as American Protestants entered the 1930s and Fundamentalists and Modernists went their separate ways, the institutions of the Princeton Theology had ceased to exist and its convictions had been scattered to the winds.”³⁷ In noting the effect of culture on the Princeton theologians, Noll contends, “If a modern evaluator must render a negative judgment of those innovations, the judgment must fall as much upon that culture as a whole as on the Princetonians by themselves.”³⁸ Noll’s respect for Sandeen is reflected in these words: “In this modern controversy over the Princeton conception of the Bible, Sandeen, Rogers, and McKim have successfully made the point that a conception of Scripture which was thoroughly at home in the intellectual world of the nineteenth century may not answer every legitimate question in the second half of the twentieth.”³⁹

Alister McGrath

Alister McGrath numbers among those who have bought into Sandeen’s bogus theory.⁴⁰ McGrath confuses secular logic with biblical logic.⁴¹ He also writes, “There is a tendency within evangelicalism to treat Scripture as simply a sourcebook of Christian doctrines, and to overlook, suppress or deny its narrative character,”⁴² as he speaks disparagingly of deriving propositional truth from Scripture. He adds, “There is a tendency to regard spirituality in terms of understanding the biblical text—that is, to reading it, making sense of its words and ideas, and understanding its historical background and its meaning for today. The emphasis continues to be on reason.”⁴³ Here again he takes a negative view of the rationality of Scripture as he says, “We need to purge rationalism from within evangelicalism.”⁴⁴ Regarding apologetics McGrath writes, “On the basis of the highly questionable assumption that ‘everyone agrees [on, *sic*] what is reasonable,’ the rational credentials of the Christian faith are set forth. This approach, however, has shown itself to be deeply flawed in two respects. First, it assumes that the appeal of Christianity is purely rational; second, it rests upon a network of universalizing assumptions which fail to relate to the strongly particularizing environments in which the gospel must be

³⁵Mark A Noll, ed., *The Princeton Theology 1812–1921* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2001) 32.

³⁶*Ibid.*, 34.

³⁷*Ibid.*, 38.

³⁸*Ibid.*, 39.

³⁹*Ibid.*, 43.

⁴⁰Alister McGrath, *A Passion for Truth: The Intellectual Coherence of Evangelicalism* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1996) 168-70.

⁴¹*Ibid.*, 171.

⁴²*Ibid.*, 173.

⁴³*Ibid.*, 174.

⁴⁴*Ibid.*, 175.

proclaimed at the global level.”⁴⁵ Regarding evangelism he notes, “It is a travesty of the biblical idea of ‘truth’ to equate it with the Enlightenment notions of conceptual or propositional correspondence, or the derived view of evangelism as the proclamation of the propositional correctness of christian doctrine.”⁴⁶

Donald Bloesch

Though his index shows no citations of Sandeen, Donald Bloesch is in tune with the temperament of the Sandeenists in downplaying rationalism:

Scripture is authoritative by virtue of its relation to the living Word, not by virtue of its truthfulness as such. This is because its truth is only understood in relation to Christ by the work of the Holy Spirit, not because of any rationalistic hermeneutic.⁴⁷

He speaks disparagingly of “the capacity of reason to judge the truth of revelation.”⁴⁸ He adds,

The knowledge of faith is not an empirical objectifying knowledge but a knowledge in which we are lifted above reason and sense into communion with the living God. . . . Historical research can show the historical probability of certain events happening, but it can give only approximate, not final, certainty. The ground of certainty is not what reason can show or prove but what faith grasps and knows as the human subject acted upon by the Holy Spirit in conjunction with the reading or hearing of the biblical word.⁴⁹

He continues, “In seeking understanding, faith must be on guard against making its cardinal doctrines too clear and distinct (à la Descartes), since this serves to undercut or deny the mystery in revelation.”⁵⁰ Among the “heresies on the right,” he includes dispensationalism and hyperfundamentalism, with the explanation, “Even the doctrine of *sola Scriptura*, understood in the Reformation sense, exists in tension with the current evangelical stress on personal religious experience as well as the fundamentalist appeal to arguments from reason and science in support of total biblical reliability.”⁵¹

Bloesch is opposed to basing the authority of Scripture on the inerrancy of the writing

⁴⁵Ibid., 176.

⁴⁶Ibid., 177.

⁴⁷Donald G. Bloesch, *Essentials of Evangelical Theology, Volume Two: Life, Ministry, and Hope* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1979) 275.

⁴⁸Ibid., 268.

⁴⁹Ibid., 268-69.

⁵⁰Ibid.

⁵¹Ibid., 276.

and then supporting inerrancy with canons of scientific rationality.⁵² He denies that the Bible is fallible or untrustworthy, but wants to limit the Bible's infallibility to matters of faith and practice.⁵³

John M. Hitchen⁵⁴

A recent piece by John M. Hitchen started me on my search for the beginning of this evangelical disdain for “rationality” and “precision.” In his discussion of “What It Means to Be an Evangelical Today,” Hitchen takes his cue from John Stott’s three evangelical priorities: “the revealing initiative of God the Father, the redeeming work of God the Son, and the transforming ministry of God the Holy Spirit.”⁵⁵ In commenting on “The Authority of God in and through the Scriptures—The Revealing Initiative of God the Father,” Hitchen remarks, “Proper attention to the role of the Holy Spirit in illuminating the Scriptures for the believer will move us beyond wooden, rationalistic approaches to inspiration and revelation.”⁵⁶ He cites approvingly the statement of Donald Bloesch that disparages right-wing, scholastic, orthodoxy revelation as “frozen into a propositional formula.”⁵⁷ Hitchen continues, “By recapturing the relevance of interpreted narrative for our identity and authority as the people of God, and by allowing the Scriptures themselves to take the place of the discredited assumptions of the Enlightenment worldview as our basis for what is credible and real in the world—i.e., as our plausibility structure—we can offer an alternative set of interpretive keys for this otherwise meaningless contemporary society.”⁵⁸

He speaks of “moving beyond a concept of truth that assumes that I can define truth once for all in unchangeable propositions, such that anyone who disagrees with my definition must, ipso facto, be in error.”⁵⁹ Hitchen’s underlying message is that we take advantage of postmodernity’s openness to an evangelical alternative by freeing ourselves from “the abrasive,

⁵²Ibid., 270.

⁵³Ibid.

⁵⁴John M. Hitchen, former Principal of Christian Leaders Training College of Papua New Guinea and National Principal of Bible College of New Zealand, is currently Lecturer in Mission at BCNZ and at Pathways College of Bible and Mission, Auckland, New Zealand.

⁵⁵John M. Hitchen, “What It Means to be an Evangelical Today—An Antipodean Perspective,” *EQ* 76/2 (2004):101, citing John R. W. Stott, *Evangelical Truth: A Personal Plea for Unity* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1999) 25-30.

⁵⁶Hitchen, “What It Means” 102.

⁵⁷Ibid., 103, citing Donald Bloesch, *Essential of Evangelical Theology*, Vol. II, 273-75.

⁵⁸Ibid., 103.

⁵⁹Ibid., 104.

defensive dogmatism” that has characterized the evangelical movement of the past.⁶⁰

As I read these words, I could not help thinking of the widespread revolt among contemporary evangelical scholars against static biblical inerrancy and its necessary counterpart, grammatical-historical hermeneutics. Phrases such as moving “beyond wooden, rationalistic approaches to inspiration and revelation,” “frozen in propositional formula,” “recapturing the relevance of interpreted narrative,” “discredited assumptions of the Enlightenment worldview,” and “moving beyond a concept of truth that assumes that I can define truth once for all in unchangeable propositions” recall the all-out war currently being waged against alleged Princetonian and millenarian teachings that purportedly arose in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, teachings such as a rational approach to Scripture through following “scientific” principles of interpretation and a clear-cut stand on biblical inerrancy such as is in tune with the 1978 “Chicago Statement” of the International Council on Biblical Inerrancy..

Response to the Sandeenists

Sandeen and His followers seem to raise at least four issues regarding developments at Princeton and dispensational premillennialism at the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century. (1) One is the alleged overreaction of Princeton scholars and dispensationalists in response to modernism that was arising in various forms at the time. They paint the picture of a group who went to an unneeded extreme in order to refute abuses of biblical teaching through an undue attention to science rather than Scripture. Their preunderstanding of correct doctrine caused them to turn to the philosophy of Descartes and Cartesianism, which exalted human reason.⁶¹ That led them into a faulty understanding of Scripture.

What the Sandeenists fail to recognize is that all or at least almost all advancement in orthodox doctrine throughout the centuries of Christianity have been in response to heresy. To codify the doctrine of inspiration more specifically was completely in line with church history. The Princetonians and millennialists sought to correct errors imposed by the Enlightenment. Such is a credit to them rather than a fault.

(2) Sandeen and company were also critical of principles of literal interpretation,

⁶⁰Ibid., 104-5.

⁶¹Rogers and McKim, *Authority and Interpretation* 167-69, 235. Rogers and McKim give the following as the purpose of their book: “It is the burden of this book to document the fact that rationalism and mysticism are not the only available alternatives. Our hypothesis is that the peculiar twists of American history have served to distort our view of both the central Christian tradition and especially of its Reformed branch. . . . Not rational proofs, but the Holy Spirit persuaded people of the Bible’s authority. . . . To erect a standard of modern, technical precision in language as the hallmark of biblical authority was totally foreign to the foundation shared by the early church” (ibid., xxi-xxii). McGrath says, “The primary feature of the movement [i.e., the Enlightenment] may be seen as its assertion of the omniscience of human reason” (Alister McGrath, *A Passion for Truth* 163). For him, that feature comprises a link with evangelicalism.

characterizing it by such expressions as “a wooden mechanical discipline.”⁶² What else could the “scientific principles of interpretation” and the “literal” interpretation that Sandeen refers to⁶³ be but grammatical-historical hermeneutics espoused by the Princeton scholars. Sandeen felt that such principles were too restrictive to allow for mysteries of the leading of the Holy Spirit in biblical interpretation. In keeping with the postmodern spirit of not limiting interpretation of a single passage to one meaning, Sandeen felt such as the principle of single meaning to be an innovation of late-nineteenth century scholarship and not the traditional Christian view.

His view was eventually deemed to be inconsistent with biblical inerrancy as attested in the findings of the Council on Biblical Inerrancy in 1978, which vouched for grammatical-historical principles as inseparable from inerrancy.⁶⁴ That evaluation befits Sandeen’s intentions, one of which was to disprove the biblical inerrancy espoused by the millenarians and the Princeton scholars.

(3) In arguing against principles of grammatical-historical hermeneutics, Sandeenists rejected the principle of single meaning along the same lines that rejected modernism and embraced postmodernism. In that spirit, Hitchen writes,

Proper attention to the role of the Holy Spirit in illuminating the Scriptures for the believer will move us beyond wooden, rationalistic approaches to inspiration and revelation. . . . This means moving beyond a concept of truth that assumes that I can define truth once for all in unchangeable propositions, such that anyone who disagrees with my definition must, ipso facto, be in error. . . . Postmodernity gives us as much right as anyone openly to present Gospel alternatives for national, societal, family and personal living.⁶⁵

To embrace Postmodernism is to dismiss all possibilities of defining propositional truth from Scripture, because truth cannot be limited to what is defined by grammatical-historical principles. Sandeenists never acknowledge that the illuminating work of the Spirit is discernible only in light of what the Scriptures teach when rightly interpreted in light of rational principles.

The impossibility of obtaining propositional truth is associated with the claim that the

⁶²Sandeen, *Roots of Fundamentalism* 118.

⁶³*Ibid.*, 117-18.

⁶⁴Article VIII, “Articles of Affirmation and Denials, The Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy,” International Council on Biblical Inerrancy (Chicago, 1978); cf. also Article XV, “Articles of Affirmation and Denials, The Chicago Statement on Biblical Hermeneutics,” International Council on Biblical Inerrancy (Chicago, 1982). See also Article XVI of the former statement which reads, “We affirm that the doctrine of inerrancy has been integral to the Church’s faith throughout its history. We deny that inerrancy is a doctrine invented by scholastic Protestantism, or is a reactionary position postulated in response to negative higher criticism.”

⁶⁵Hitchen, “What It Means” 102, 104-5.

“common sense” position is an outgrowth of the Enlightenment worldview. Such a claim flows from an assumption that both modernism—stemming from the Enlightenment—and fundamentalism build on the principle of being able to define truth once for all in unchangeable propositions,⁶⁶ the difference between both of these and postmodernism is that postmodernism disallows that propositional stance. That comparison of modernism and fundamentalism is, of course, ridiculous. In contrast to fundamentalism, modernism’s proposition built upon a very loose doctrine of biblical inspiration, which allowed all sorts of opportunities to question the integrity of the text. Fundamentalism on the other hand held a high view of Scripture that required a literal interpretation of the text. One can hardly say with a straight face that the “common sense” approach is an outgrowth of an Enlightenment worldview.

Since Sandeen’s approach leads inevitably to a more subjective approach to interpretation rather than a grammatical-historical one, it encourages a looser view of narrative portions of Scripture. Hitchen expresses it this way:

The return to understanding Scripture as narrative offers a way to bring a fresh presentation of an evangelical understanding of Scripture as God revealing himself authoritatively while avoiding charges of absolutism and lack of respect for the historical particularity both of the text and of our human contexts. . . . By recapturing the relevance of interpreted narrative for our identity and authority as the people of God, and by allowing the Scriptures themselves to take the place of the discredited assumptions of the Enlightenment worldview as our basis for what is credible and real in the world—i.e., as our plausibility structure—we can offer an alternative set of interpretive keys for this otherwise meaningless contemporary society.”⁶⁷

This premise allows contemporary Christians to read their own situations into the text at will, with no restrictions placed on the text’s meaning by authorial—human and divine—intention. What humans deem as the illuminating work of the Spirit is often merely a human inclination unless it coincides with criteria yielded by interpretation of Scripture according to rational principles.

(4) A fourth issue raised by Sandeenism relates to how the Holy Spirit is involved in the interpretation of Scripture. How can a person know whether he is being led to a certain conclusion by a spirit of error rather than by the Holy Spirit? He can know only through what the Bible teaches. He can know what the Bible teaches only through rational principles of hermeneutics. As has been exemplified all too often, a person can make the Bible say whatever he wants it to say by erecting his own set of interpretive principles. What makes a set of principles wrong? Their irrationality.

The objection comes often that rationality to the Western mind will not coincide with rationality in other parts of the world. If one honors that type of evasion, so many different definitions of rationality would emerge that the Bible would conflict with itself. The Bible itself

⁶⁶Ibid., 104.

⁶⁷Ibid., 103.

builds on its own definition of rationality, and that is the rationality that has prevailed in countries where Christianity and the Bible have had a prolonged impact on culture. The Bible is not an irrational book and must be interpreted according to rational principles. God is a rational being. The Holy Spirit who inspired biblical writers is rational, and His work must be treated in a rational light.⁶⁸

The Princeton Theologians

The heavy focus in this debate on the Princeton theologians warrants a closer look at the weaknesses and the strengths of these men.

Their Weaknesses

Sandeenists have faulted the Princeton theologians for concessions they made to the Enlightenment. One of these concessions was their attempt to integrate the Bible with the findings of secular science such as Darwinianism. In this the Sandeenists furnish a valid criticism.

For example, Noll characterizes B. B. Warfield as a theistic evolutionist:⁶⁹

In the course of his [i.e., Warfield's] wide scientific reading, he brought to a conclusion A. A. Hodge's earlier efforts to make peace between the Princeton Theology and modern science. Eventually Warfield took special pains to transcend the antithesis which Charles Hodge had perceived between creation and evolution. He wrote in 1911, "‘evolution’ cannot act as a substitute for creation, but at best can supply only a theory of the method of the divine providence." Evolution, that is, was one of the possible "interpretations" for the "facts" of nature which did not violate the "facts" of Scripture.⁷⁰

⁶⁸For another view on rationality in biblical interpretation see John M. Hitchen, "What It Means to Be an Evangelical Today—An Antipodean Perspective, Part One—Mapping Our Movement," *EQ* 76/1 (2004):47-64. Hitchen writes, "Donald Bloesch suggested, and others like Alister McGrath have taken up his concern, that we need 'to call into question the bent towards rationalism in current evangelicalism', listing Carl Henry, John Warwick Montgomery, Norman Geisler and Francis Schaeffer as successors to the rationalistic tendencies within the 'Protestant scholastic orthodoxy of the Princeton School', championed in earlier generations by the Hodges and Benjamin Warfield. From another quarter, Lesslie Newbigin also critiques fundamentalism and evangelicalism's understanding of scripture. He sees the claims to have an absolute certainty of truth expressed in inerrant propositions as an unconscious surrender to the rationalistic 'plausibility structures' of the Enlightenment paradigm" (ibid., 54-55; cf. McGrath, *Passion for Truth* 170).

⁶⁹Noll, *Princeton Theology* 45.

⁷⁰Ibid., 289.

Barr majors in this line of criticism of the Princetonians: “It is possible to argue further that the chief doctrinal stream accepted in fundamentalism, the Princeton theology of the Hodges and Warfield, took its method expressly from the analogy of natural science, and that natural science as seen in a traditional Newtonian mould.”⁷¹ He later adds,

Hodge [i.e., Charles Hodge] did not think there was any ultimate conflict between religion and science. Theologians should learn the lesson of the Copernican revolution, and know that it is unwise to array themselves needlessly against the teachings of science. One should let science take its course, assured ‘that the Scriptures will accommodate themselves to all well-authenticated scientific facts in time to come, as they have in time past’. The wording, that the scriptures would ‘accommodate themselves’, is worth noting.⁷²

I must concur with the Sandeenists in this criticism of the Princetonians. As I have earlier expressed, evangelical Christians have no justification for integrating the Bible with findings of such secular disciplines as science.⁷³ In that kind of endeavor, the Bible is always the loser. Science cannot be used to correct grammatical-historical principles of interpretation.

Their Strengths

Where critics of the Princeton Theologians stray from the truth, however, lies in their insistence that biblical inerrancy is limited to matters of faith and practice. They claim that the Princetonians in their emphasis on common sense relied upon integrating their system with Scottish Common Sense Realism. Charles Hodge and others of that school, however, maintained that a reliance on common sense in interpreting Scripture was not something they had invented.⁷⁴ In citing Hodge’s disclaimer, Sandeenists such as Rogers and McKim attribute a reliance on common sense to the Princetonian reliance on the Cartesian “Common Sense” philosophy.⁷⁵ Their charge against Hodge is unfounded, however.

As far back as the second century A.D., the church father Irenaeus used common sense to defend the truthfulness of Luke’s reporting with the words, “It follows then, as of course, that

⁷¹Barr, *Fundamentalism* 93.

⁷²*Ibid.*, 273.

⁷³See Robert L. Thomas, *Evangelical Hermeneutics: The New Versus the Old* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2002), especially the chapter on “General Revelation and Biblical Hermeneutics,” 113-40.

⁷⁴In celebrating his fiftieth year as professor at Princeton, Charles Hodge stated, “I am not afraid to say that a new idea never originated in this Seminary” (A. A. Hodge, *Life of Charles Hodge, D.D. LL.D.*, cited by Rogers and McKim, *Authority and Interpretation* 276).

⁷⁵Rogers and McKim, *Authority and Interpretation* 245-46.

these men must either receive the rest of his narrative, or else reject these parts also. For no person of *common sense* can permit them to receive some things recounted by Luke as being truth, and to set others aside, as if he had not known the truth.”⁷⁶ Irenaeus, of course, came long before a Cartesian approach to reason existed. The fact is that Hodge himself rejected a purely Cartesian approach to rationality when he cited Rom 1:21-23 to show that human reason and conscience are inadequate guides in relation to the things of God.⁷⁷ DesCartes would never have endorsed such a position as that. Woodbridge surveys the entire Christian era before Princeton to show that Christians used common sense to defend the inerrancy of Scripture.⁷⁸

Along with their assertions as to the reasonableness of Scripture, the Princeton theologians insisted on the precision of Scripture. Otherwise, they could not have advocated verbal inspiration of the same. An article antedating the Princetonians read as follows:

[T]he scriptures were designed to be translated into different languages, this made it more necessary that they should be written, at first, with *peculiar accuracy and precision*. Men always write with exactness when they expect their writings will be translated into various languages. And upon this ground, we may reasonably suppose, that the Divine Spirit dictated every thought and word to the sacred penmen, to prevent, as much as possible, errors and mistakes from finally creeping into their writings by the translation of them into other languages.⁷⁹

The Princetonians upheld the same view of the original writings of the Bible, recognizing that later copying of the autographs would introduce errors into those copies.

In their minds, the rationality and precision of Scripture were necessary companions. They did not need to incorporate Enlightenment philosophical tenets into their understanding of the Bible, because the Bible itself dictates the need for Spirit-guided reason in order to understand the precise meaning of the words originally penned.

The Truth about Rationality and Precision

The central issue for the Sandeenists has been the inerrancy of Scripture, which of necessity is the counterpart of biblical rationality and precision. That raises a serious question: Why have some evangelicals who profess to be inerrantists been so ready to fall in line with the Sandeenists in questioning the rationality and precision of the Bible?

⁷⁶Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 3. 14. 3-4, cited by Woodbridge, *Biblical Authority* 32. [emphasis added]

⁷⁷Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology* 1:363-64.

⁷⁸Woodbridge, *Biblical Authority* 13-118.

⁷⁹“On Inspiration,” *Connecticut Evangelical Magazine* (December 1803):234, cited by Woodbridge, *Biblical Authority* 127. [emphasis added]

What the Truth Is Not

Rationalism and precision go hand-in-hand with the inerrancy of Scripture. Sacrifice rationalistic and precise understanding of the Bible, and you have opted for an errantist understanding of the Bible. Yet, surprisingly, the lead article in a recent journal of the inerrantist Evangelical Theological Society raises some of the same issues as do the Sandeenists.⁸⁰ In the article Joel Green reflects a disdain for a number of the same objects as critics of the Princeton theology. Four examples of this similarity will suffice.

Green shows the same proclivity to emphasize the narrative portions of Scripture and how these should shape the lives of Christians when he writes, “[T]he bulk of Scripture comes to us in the form of narratives, rather than with a preoccupation with the rational essence of the faith, its dogmatic essentials, so characteristic of theology in the modern period,”⁸¹ and “[T]he notion of ‘inhabiting the world of biblical narrative’ is important when it claims that ‘the story that *most decisively shapes* our lives must be the biblical story.’”⁸² That perspective strongly resembles what Hitchen has written about “recapturing the relevance of interpreted narrative for our identity and authority as the people of God.”⁸³ Instead of adopting the proposition of biblical inerrancy, this approach to narrative highlights the practical effect of Scripture on the lives of Christians.

Green also shows the same disdain for rationalistic approaches to revelation. His words cited just above speak against “a preoccupation with the rational essence of the faith, its dogmatic essentials.” That perspective strongly resembles that of Sandeen who charged that Charles Hodge and Princeton Seminary “produced a wooden, mechanical discipline as well as a rigorously logical one” that did not allow the witness of the Spirit to play an important role in biblical interpretation.⁸⁴ For Green, this disdain for a rational approach to Scripture includes a ruling out of traditional quests for objectivity in interpretation.⁸⁵

Like the Sandeenists, Green also reflects a disdain for deriving propositional truth from Scripture: “This means that the primary agenda of theological study of Scripture would not be the construction of systematic theology, in the restricted sense of organizing and restating the

⁸⁰Joel B. Green, “Practicing the Gospel in a Post-Critical World: The Promise of Theological Exegesis,” *JETS* 47/3 (September 2004):387-97.

⁸¹*Ibid.*, 392.

⁸²*Ibid.*, 393. [emphasis in the original]

⁸³Hitchen, “What It Means” 103.

⁸⁴*Ibid.*, 102, 104-5.

⁸⁵Green writes, “I recognize that, in mapping this path, I have vacated biblical studies of the sorts of claims to scientific, neutral analysis that have been its bread and butter” (“Practicing the Gospel” 391).

central propositions of the biblical witnesses.”⁸⁶ Such is a position very much like that of Hitchen when he speaks of “moving beyond a concept of truth that assumes that I can define truth once for all in unchangeable propositions.”⁸⁷

Green also moves away from supporting the precision of narrative portions of Scripture when he writes about the inadequacy of “foundationalism”:

In the environment that developed, in order for data to be “hard,” it needed to be historical; that is, secure foundations for theological discourse were historically defined. How much historical data would be required was a matter of debate, but, for example, historical Jesus studies have been energized in the twentieth century through attempts . . . to demonstrate that the church’s faith rests securely and squarely on the strong pillars of what Jesus actually did and said.

This sort of foundationalism, formed deep in the superheated core of historical positivism, has suffered from the tectonic movements in the philosophy of history.⁸⁸

This view of interpreted narrative as distinguished from factual narrative is quite similar to Hitchen’s description of “recapturing the relevance of interpreted narrative for our identity and authority as the people of God, and . . . allowing the Scriptures themselves to take the place of the discredited assumptions of the Enlightenment worldview as our basis for what is credible and real in the world.”⁸⁹ Such a view of narrative shows a total disrespect for the precision of Scriptural accounts.⁹⁰

What the Truth Is

Given its rightful place of priority, the divine element in the inspiration of Scripture guarantees both its rationality and its precision, because our God is both rational and precise.

Some of my earlier words about the rationality of God and of Scripture clarify the difference between secular logic and biblical logic:

Two kinds of logic prevail in the world. Secular logic is to be expected among humans who are outside the body of Christ, but that logic is inevitably self-centered

⁸⁶Ibid., 395.

⁸⁷Hitchen, “What It Means” 102, 104-5.

⁸⁸Green, “Practicing the Gospel” 390.

⁸⁹Cf. n. 66 above.

⁹⁰For other illustrations of evangelical abuse of Scripture’s precision, see Thomas, “Rationality, Meaningfulness, and Precision” 192-97; Robert L. Thomas and F. David Farnell, eds., *The Jesus Crisis* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1998) 17-27, 356-68. Evangelicals are all too ready to allow that the Gospels contain only approximations of what Jesus said and did.

because of the blindness that fell on the whole race when Adam disobeyed God's command. The other kind of logic is biblical logic, the logic of reality because it is God's logic, a logic that appeals to man's rational faculties enlightened by the new birth and the illumination of the Holy Spirit. Scripture appeals to this latter kind of mind.

“Come now, and let us reason together,”
Says the LORD,
“Though your sins be as scarlet,
They will be as white as snow;
Though they are red like crimson,
They will be like wool” (Isa 1:18).

To the obedient child of God, those words make perfect sense, but to the disobedient unbeliever they are utterly irrational.

To point out the blindness and irrationality of the unbeliever in the realm of biblical logic is hardly necessary. The apostle Paul wrote, “[A] natural man does not accept the things of the Spirit of God; for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually appraised” (1 Cor 2:14). The absence of the Spirit's illumination in such a person's life renders the natural man helpless when it comes to comprehending “the deep things of God” (1 Cor 2:10b) as found in His Word. That fact is regrettable, but it is explainable. What is not explainable, however, is how those who profess to be God's children can attribute irrationality to the Scriptures. Yet such is commonplace among today's evangelicals.⁹¹

The logic of Scripture is ultimate reality because of the divine element that prevailed over the human element in its inspiration.

Part of my earlier discussion of biblical precision is also relevant to the denial thereof by the Sandeenists.

\$ In Matt 5:18 Jesus said, “For truly I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not the smallest letter (i.e., *yodh*) or stroke (i.e., *serif*) shall pass away from the Law, until all is accomplished.” In other words, neither the smallest letter nor the smallest part of any letter will pass away from the OT until all is accomplished, i.e., until heaven and earth pass away.

\$ In Matt 22:31-32 Jesus said, “But regarding the resurrection of the dead, have you not read that which was spoken to you by God, saying, ‘I am the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob’? He is not the God of the dead but of the living.” The Lord's proof of a future resurrection resides in the present tense versus the past tense of the verb: “I am” rather than “I was.”

⁹¹Thomas, “Rationality, Meaningfulness, and Precision” 176. For a more detailed explanation of the Bible's rationality and additional examples of evangelical violations thereof, see the broader context of that article.

\$ In Matt 24:35 Jesus said, “Heaven and earth will pass away, but My words shall not pass away.” Jesus assigned a permanence to the words that He spoke just as He did to the words of the OT.

\$ In Gal 3:16 Paul recalls, “Now the promises were spoken to Abraham and to his seed. He does not say, ‘And to seeds,’ as *referring* to many, but *rather* to one, ‘And to your seed,’ that is, Christ.” That Paul advocates a precise handling of the OT is unquestionable. By inspiration of the Spirit the author cites the explicit significance between a singular and a plural.

\$ In Jas 2:10 the author wrote, “For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles in one point, he has become guilty of all.” Our God is a God of precision. He is interested in details. Showing respect of persons is in the eyes of the inspired writer the one point that condemns a person as a breaker of the whole law.⁹²

Without question, the Bible itself insists on the ultimate in precision for its contents, because its Author is a God of precision.

Therefore, the truth about truth is that it is both rational and precise. The myth that those conclusions resulted from the Princetonians adoption of Enlightenment thinking is merely a smoke screen for those whose inclination is to veer away from the inerrancy of Scripture. That so many evangelicals who profess to be inerrantists are buying into Sandeenist principles is sad. Principles that are inconsistent with biblical inerrancy have no place on an inerrantist agenda. When questioning the inerrancy of Scripture, one undercuts the biblical teaching about the future.

POSTMODERN BLUR GENERATING MIDDLE-GROUND MANIA

Another symptom of postmodernism’s influence on evangelical hermeneutics is what could be called “middle-ground mania.” The interpretive atmosphere of today appears to impose an insatiable appetite for theologians to have the best of two worlds—to locate themselves between established positions—thereby mixing literal and nonliteral hermeneutical principles in various combinations.

John Piper provides an example of this by classifying himself in three theological camps, dispensationalism, covenant theology, and new covenant theology.

John Piper has some things in common with each of these views, but does not classify himself within any of these three camps. He is probably the furthest away from dispensationalism, although he does agree with dispensationalism that there will be a millennium.

Many of his theological heroes have been covenant theologians (for example, many of the Puritans), and he does see some merit in the concept of a pre-fall covenant of works,

⁹²Ibid., 185-86. For a more detailed discussion of biblical precision, see 184-207 of this article.

but he has not taken a position on their specific conception of the covenant of grace.

In regards to his views on the Mosaic Law, he seems closer to new covenant theology than covenant theology, although once again it would not work to say that he precisely falls within that category.⁹³

Postmodernism sees merit in contradictory systems to the point that a person positions himself in either a “none-of-the-above” or an “all-of-the-above” category as has Piper.

For a time, progressive dispensationalism was alone in seeking a compromise between covenant theology and dispensationalism. Now at least three theological camps are vying for position in the hermeneutical gap that separates the two systems. All this comes because of the “middle-ground mania” that postmodernism has generated. Further, it all comes through the sacrifice of consistent grammatical-historical hermeneutical principles.

To illustrate the inconsistency, all one needs to do is to trace how the competing systems treat the land promise given to Abraham as part of the Abrahamic Covenant. Without question, God promised Abraham a specific plot of land on the earth as it is currently known, a land that was populated by numerous groups of people:⁹⁴ “Now the Canaanite was then in the land. The LORD appeared to Abram and said, ‘To your descendants I will give this land’” (Gen 12:6b-7a; cf. references to the land’s Canaanite, Hittite, Amorite, Perizzite, Hivite, and Jebusite inhabitants in Exod 3:8). One passage among others in which God’s promise to Abraham was confirmed is Gen 15:18-21: “On that day the LORD made a covenant with Abram, saying, ‘To your descendants I have given this land, From the river of Egypt as far as the great river, the river Euphrates: the Kenite and the Kenizzite and the Kadmonite and the Hittite and the Perizzite and the Rephaim and the Amorite and the Canaanite and the Girgashite and the Jebusite.’” The territory thus described has an estimated size of “300,000 square miles or twelve and one-half times the size of Great Britain and Ireland.”⁹⁵

Through that unilateral covenant God obligated Himself, no one else, to give the land to Abraham, later confirming it as a perpetual inheritance through circumcision in Gen 17:7-11.⁹⁶ God repeated the same basic promise to Abraham’s son Isaac (Gen 26:3) and to his grandson

⁹³Online at http://www.desiringgod.org/ResourceLibrary/QuestionsAndAnswers/ByTitle/1439_What_does_John_Piper_believe_about_dispensationalism_covenant_theology_and_new_covenant_theology/, dated 1/23/06, accessed 11/18/06.

⁹⁴Ronald B. Allen, “The Land of Israel,” in *Israel the Land and the People: An Evangelical Affirmation of God’s Promises*, ed. H. Wayne House (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1998) 21.

⁹⁵Charles L. Feinberg, *Israel: At the Center of History & Revelation*, 3d. Ed. (Portland, Ore: Multnomah, 1980) 168.

⁹⁶Walter C. Kaiser Jr., “The Land of Israel and the Future Return (Zechariah 10:6-12),” *Israel the Land and the People: An Evangelical Affirmation of God’s Promises* 211.

Jacob (Gen 28:4;28:24), whose son Joseph still later alluded to the promise (Gen 50:24).⁹⁷ Since God swore to Abraham that He would fulfil His promise and then swore by Himself (Heb 6:13, 17-18)—His word in Genesis 12:7 and His oath in Gen 22:16-17—God’s gifts to and callings of Israel are irrevocable (Rom 11:29).⁹⁸

Various theological systems have explained those land promises differently, but one has impacted public opinion more profoundly than the others in creating sympathy in America and elsewhere for Israel and her right to have sovereign control over the land or a portion thereof promised to Abraham. The following discussion will sample five systems to see how they interpret the land promises: covenant theology, new covenant theology, kingdom theology, progressive dispensationalism, and dispensationalism.

Covenant Theology

In initiating his case for replacement theology, covenant-theologian Sizer writes,

While Christian Zionists generally afford Israel a special status above the church, dispensationalists also believe Israel will succeed the church. So it is ironic that they accuse covenantalists of perpetrating a ‘replacement theology’ for suggesting the church has replaced Israel.⁹⁹

He then proceeds to note, “There is, however, no indication in the text of Genesis 12 that this promise of blessing and warning and cursing was ever intended to extend beyond Abraham.”¹⁰⁰

Sizer and covenantalists like him usually point out, “[T]he idea that the Jewish people continue to enjoy a special status by virtue of the covenants made with the Patriarchs is in conflict with the clear and unambiguous statements of the New Testament.”¹⁰¹ To support such a statement, he cites Acts 3:23, “Anyone who does not listen to him [Christ] will be completely cut off from among his people” (NIV), and concludes that if Peter’s Jewish listeners “persisted in refusing to recognize Jesus as their Messiah, they would cease to be the people of God.”¹⁰²

Sizer also cites Peter’s encounter in the house of Cornelius and Peter’s words, “I now realise how true it is that God does not show favouritism but accepts men from every nation who fear him and do what is right” (Acts 10:34-35), using them to prove that “it cannot logically be

⁹⁷Ibid.

⁹⁸Ibid.

⁹⁹Sizer, *Christian Zionism* 146.

¹⁰⁰Ibid., 148.

¹⁰¹Ibid., 149.

¹⁰²Ibid.

presumed that Jews continue to enjoy a favoured or exclusive status.”¹⁰³ He even goes so far as to agree with Bass’ view that dispensationalism’s distinction between Israel and the church may be seen as heresy.¹⁰⁴

Sizer cites James’ use of Amos 9:11-12 in Acts 15:16-18 to demonstrate that James is “spiritualizing” the OT text to vindicate “the universality of the gospel and the results of the first-century mission.”¹⁰⁵ In doing so, he denies that James has any reference to a predetermined and futuristic plan for national Israel, separate from the church.¹⁰⁶ He refers to other Scriptures such as Matt 8:10-12 and Luke 14:14-24 to show that believing Gentiles will replace unbelieving Jews in the future kingdom.¹⁰⁷ In these passages Sizer’s use of proof-texts leaves much to be desired.

In advocating that Israel ceased to be the people of God because of her rejection of Jesus as the promised Messiah, what Sizer misses is a point that Beecher made over a hundred years ago:

So far forth as its benefits accrue to any particular person or generation in Israel, it is conditioned on their obedience. But in its character as expressing God’s purpose of blessing for the human race, we should not expect it to depend on the obedience or disobedience of a few.¹⁰⁸

In Kaiser’s words, “The conditionality was not attached to the promise but only to the participants who would benefit from these abiding promises.”¹⁰⁹ By this Kaiser meant that participation in the blessings depended on an individual’s spiritual condition.¹¹⁰ A future

¹⁰³Ibid., 150.

¹⁰⁴Ibid., 150. See Clarence Bass, *Backgrounds to Dispensationalism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1960) 27-29, who says that dispensationalism is a departure from historic Christianity.

¹⁰⁵Sizer, *Christian Zionism* 157.

¹⁰⁶Ibid.

¹⁰⁷Ibid., 158-59. Among the Scriptures used by Robert L. Reymond to demonstrate that ethnic Israel has no claim on the land promises made to Abraham are the following: Matt 21:33-45 = Mark 12:1-12 = Luke 20:9-19; 1 Thess 2:15-16; Rom 9:27-29 (“Who Really Owns the ‘Holy Land’? Part 2,” *The Trinity Review* 257 (July 2006):1-2.

¹⁰⁸Willis J. Beecher, *The Prophets and the Promise* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell, 1905; reprint, Eugene, Ore.: Wipf and Stock, 2002) 220.

¹⁰⁹Walter C. Kaiser Jr., *Toward an Old Testament Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1978) 94.

¹¹⁰Kaiser, “Land of Israel” 212-13.

generation will arise who will obey and be spiritually prepared to inherit precisely the land that God promised to Abraham. The validity of God's promise does not depend on Israel's obedience. It depends on the God's faithfulness to His covenant.

One wonders whether those who think the land promises to Abraham will go unfulfilled because of Israel's faithlessness would say the same thing about God's promise of making Abraham a blessing to all nations. Genesis 12:3c records, "And in you all the families of the earth will be blessed." Would they say that this promise has also been abrogated by Israel's lack of faithfulness? This promise of spiritual blessing to Abraham of being a spiritual blessing to all nations is still in effect and will be fulfilled to the letter just like another aspect of the Abrahamic covenant, the land promise. Thus, Sizer is quite mistaken when he writes, "Subsequent to Pentecost, under the illumination of the Holy Spirit, the apostles begin to use old covenant language concerning the land in new ways."¹¹¹

New Covenant Theology

New Covenant Theology handles the land promises to Abraham differently. That position starts by affirming that the promises were fulfilled when Israel under Joshua's leadership conquered Canaan. Michael W. Adams quotes the OT book of Joshua on this point:

So the LORD gave Israel all the land he had sworn to give their forefathers, and they took possession of it and settled there. The LORD gave them rest on every side, just as he had sworn to their forefathers. Not one of their enemies withstood them; the LORD handed all their enemies over to them. *Not one of the LORD'S good promises to the house of Israel failed; every one was fulfilled. Joshua 21:43-45, Emphasis Added.*¹¹²

From this passage he surmises, "It seems quite clear from Joshua 21 that under Joshua's leadership, the nation of Israel experienced rest from oppression on every one of their borders. We do not know how long this rest lasted, but the Joshua passage makes it very evident to us that they *did* rest."¹¹³

Adams acknowledges that the rest did not last and then cites Heb 4:8-9: "For if Joshua *had given them rest*, God would not have spoken later about another day. There remains, then, a

¹¹¹Sizer, *Christian Zionism* 169.

¹¹²Michael W. Adams, "In Defense of the New Covenant: A Theological Response to Richard Barcellos' Book, In Defense of the Decalogue: A Critique of New Covenant Theology" (<http://www.ncbf.net/PDF/Defense.pdf>, 8, accessed 8/7/06); cf. also Tom Wells & Fred G. Zaspel, *New Covenant Theology: Description, Deinition, Defense* (Frederick, Md.: New Covenant Media, 2002) 60-61.

¹¹³Ibid., 9 [emphasis in the original]; cf. also Wells and Zaspel, *New Covenant Theology* 232-33.

Sabbath-rest for the people of God.”¹¹⁴ He points out that the only way to avoid a contradiction between the two passages is to see the author of Hebrews as viewing the physical picture of Israel in the land as finding “its true fulfillment in salvation, resulting in heaven for every believer.”¹¹⁵ In other words, the land promises to Abraham are a physical picture of a spiritual truth that would never have been known from the OT alone. The NT gives completely new information on the subject.

John G. Reisinger follows a similar line of argument in pointing to Luke 1:68-79 to prove that the promise to Abraham remained unfulfilled throughout the OT. When Christ came, its fulfillment came and was spiritual in nature.¹¹⁶ He acknowledges the correctness of dispensational teaching that throughout the OT the land promise had to do with physical land, but says that Luke totally spiritualizes that promise. In speaking of dispensationalists, he states, “Their adamant ‘naturalizing’ of specific things that NT Apostles spiritualize make those NT passages impossible to understand.”¹¹⁷

He summarizes,

The NT Scriptures never once interpret the covenant with Abraham to deal with the land of Palestine, let alone make the land the primary part of the promise. The exact opposite is true in the OT Scriptures. The land is the heart of the covenant promise to Abraham from Genesis 15 to the end of the OT Scriptures but stops at Malachi. The ‘land promise’ is never repeated in the NT Scriptures.¹¹⁸

He continues his criticism of dispensationalism’s view of physical land promises:

They must also *naturalize* the blessing promised to Abraham that Peter clearly *spiritualizes*. . . . It has always amazed me that the people that insist on a literal interpretation of the *words of Scripture* will not do that very thing when a New Testament Apostle literally *spiritualizes* an Old Testament prophecy.¹¹⁹

Reisinger basically agrees with Dispensationalism regarding OT interpretation but feels that the NT alters that interpretation:

¹¹⁴Ibid. [emphasis in the original]

¹¹⁵Ibid.

¹¹⁶John G. Reisinger, *Abraham’s Four Seeds* (Frederick, Md.: New Covenant Media, 1998) 89-91.

¹¹⁷Ibid., 28.

¹¹⁸Ibid., 39-40.

¹¹⁹Ibid., 41. [emphasis in the original]

I personally believe the NT Scriptures make the physical land to be a type of spiritual rest and the Israelite to be a type of a true believer. However, we could not come to that conclusion from anything in the OT Scriptures. If all we had was the OT Scriptures, it would be very easy to hold the same view of Israel and the Land of Israel as that held by Dispensationalism.¹²⁰

His position is, “I believe the Dispensationalist is wrong in not seeing that the NT Scriptures spiritualize the land promise, but the answer is not to deny what the Old Testament Scriptures clearly say.”¹²¹

All this brings Reisinger to conclude, “[W]e must realize that there is not a single repetition, or mention, of the land promise in any passage in the NT Scriptures including Romans 11 and the entire book of Revelation.”¹²²

His interesting proposal raises questions, however. To what land was Jesus referring when he spoke of the future repentance of the city of Jerusalem (Matt 23:37-39)? Is it not the city that most prominently represents the land promised to Abraham? Zion is a name often assigned to Jerusalem. The NT is not void of references to geographical Zion, is it (cf. Rom 9:33; 11:26)? The book of Revelation has frequent references to Jerusalem and therefore to the land of Israel. Revelation 11:1-13 tells of the measuring of the temple and two witnesses active in Jerusalem, and a revival that will take place in that city following a great earthquake. Beale in his commentary on Revelation follows an eclectic philosophy of hermeneutics.¹²³ In his commentary, Osborne does the same except when he combines not just idealism and futurism. He also mixes in a bit of preterism.¹²⁴ Through their combining of idealist, futurist, and even preterist interpretations, both men shy away from understanding “Jerusalem” in a geographical sense. Yet the language could hardly be clearer. John has in mind the earthly city as he records the vision given him. Aune agrees with Osborne that the temple refers to the heavenly temple, not the earthly one, but he does so under the assumption that the earthly temple will not be rebuilt.¹²⁵ Yet he later acknowledges that the temple described in 11:1-2 is most definitely the

¹²⁰Ibid., 84.

¹²¹Ibid., 91.

¹²²Ibid., 92.

¹²³G. K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, The International Greek Testament Commentary, eds. I. Howard Marshall and Donald A. Hagner (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999) 48-49.

¹²⁴Grant R. Osborne, *Revelation*, Baker Exegetical Commentary of the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2002) 21-22.

¹²⁵David E Aune, *Revelation 6–16*, vol 52b of *Word Biblical Commentary* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1998) 596-97.

earthly temple in Jerusalem.¹²⁶ He also believes that “the holy city” is a clear reference to the earthly city Jerusalem that is referred to again in 11:8. Through a combination of source and form critical explanations of the passage Aune is able to combine literal-futuristic interpretations of the passage with allegorical-idealistic explanations.

Other references in Revelation to the land promised to Abraham include Revelation 16:16 and 20:9. The former refers to a place called Harmagedon where a future battle will be fought. The “Har” prefix probably refers to the hill country around a town called Megiddo. Megiddo was a city on the Great Road linking Gaza and Damascus, connecting the coastal plain and the Plain of Esdraelon or Megiddo. The reference in 20:9 speaks of “the camp of the saints and the beloved city,” most clearly a reference to the city of Jerusalem. Regarding “the beloved city” Aune comments, “Since the heavenly Jerusalem does not make its appearance until 21:10 (aside from 3:12), ‘the beloved city’ cannot be the New Jerusalem but must be the earthly Jerusalem.”¹²⁷ Yet one should not conclude that Aune interprets Revelation futuristically. Because of his source and redaction critical assumptions he simply assumes that the final editor of the Apocalypse incorporated earlier traditions and/or myths into the passage. In addition, Rev 16:12 mentions the Euphrates River which was one of the boundaries of the land promised to Abraham (cf. Gen 15:18). That is the river the kings from the east must cross to get to Harmagedon.

Reisinger’s claim that no land promise occurs in the NT falls short by not recognizing that the land promise is assumed in the NT. He also falters in positing that the NT contradicts the consistent teaching of the OT in regard to the land promise to Abraham. Such an approach raises questions about the inerrancy of Scripture that is an inevitable part of grammatical-historical hermeneutics. The land promise is a holdover from the OT, never having been abrogated. Interestingly, this same gentleman allows for an ongoing distinctiveness of Israel as a people, however: “I personally believe that Israel, as a people, is still a unique people in God’s purposes. However, as a nation, they do not have any spiritual or eternal purposes independent of the church. . . . It is one thing to think of Israel as a physical nation with national and earthly distinctions and another to think of Israel as a people with God’s peculiar mark upon them.”¹²⁸ His is a strange position, admitting that Israel is a unique people in God’s purposes and yet denying them the role of a chosen nation, strange indeed in light of Paul’s words “who are Israelites, to whom belongs the adoption as sons, and the glory and the covenants and the giving of the Law and the *temple* service and the promises, whose are the fathers, and from whom is the Christ according to the flesh” (Rom 9:4-5a). Paul unequivocally speaks of Israel as a people unique in their relation to God, a people to whom God had promised a certain plot of land.

New Covenant Theology forfeits its credibility by failing to do justice to God’s faithfulness to His promise of giving Abraham the land “[f]rom the river of Egypt as far as the

¹²⁶Ibid., 605.

¹²⁷David E. Aune, *Revelation 17–22*, vol. 52c of *Word Biblical Commentary* (Nashville: Thomas, 1998) 1098-99.

¹²⁸Reisinger, *Abraham’s Four Seeds* 44.

great river, the river Euphrates” (Gen 15:18).

Kingdom Theology

Kingdom Theology lays heavy emphasis on the centrality of the kingdom in the Bible. Russell D. Moore represents the cause of kingdom theology [hereafter KT] and places the blame for the failure of evangelicals in the sociopolitical arena on an inadequate evangelical theology of the Kingdom: “[T]he failure of evangelical politics points us to something far more important that underlies it—the failure of evangelical theology.”¹²⁹ The position places heavy emphasis on the work of Carl F. H. Henry, particularly in his *The Uneasy Conscience of Modern Fundamentalism*.¹³⁰ As seen by Russell D. Moore, Henry was a leader in the new evangelical movement right after World War II that sought to cure evangelicalism of its fundamentalistic isolation from the activity of contemporary society and politics:

Henry’s *Uneasy Conscience*, after all, was not first of all a sociopolitical tract. Instead, it served in many ways to define theologically much of what it means to be a “new evangelical,” in contrast to the older fundamentalism. Along with Ramm, Carnell, and others, Henry pressed the theological case for evangelicalism in terms of a vigorous engagement with nonevangelical thought. As articulated by Henry and the early constellations of evangelical theology, such as Fuller Theological Seminary and the National Association of Evangelicals, evangelicalism would not differ with fundamentalism in the “fundamentals” of doctrinal conviction, but in the application of Christian truth claims onto all areas of human endeavor. Henry’s *Uneasy Conscience*, which set the stage for evangelical differentiation from isolationist American fundamentalism, sought to be what Harold J. Ockenga called in his foreword to the monograph “a healthy antidote to fundamentalist aloofness in a distraught world.” Thus, the call to sociopolitical engagement was not incidental to evangelical theological identity, but was at the forefront of it. Henry’s *Uneasy Conscience*, and the movement it defined, sought to distinguish the postwar evangelical effort so that evangelical theologians, as one observer notes, “found themselves straddling the fence between two well-established positions: fundamentalist social detachment and the liberal Social Gospel.”¹³¹

In addition, Moore continues, evangelicalism was divided into two camps, the covenantalists and the dispensationalists with their differing view of the Kingdom, a division that

¹²⁹Russell D. Moore, *The Kingdom of Christ: The New Evangelical Perspective* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway, 2004) 11.

¹³⁰Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1947.

¹³¹Moore, *Kingdom of Christ* 19.

hindered evangelicalism from having a united impact on the secular world.¹³² Henry considered the debates between premillennialists and amillennialists that divided evangelicalism as secondary issues. As Moore puts it,

Henry's *Uneasy Conscience* waded into the Kingdom debate as an incipient call for a new consensus, one that was a break from the Kingdom concept of classical dispensationalism and also from the spiritual understanding of many covenant theologians. Henry was joined in this by the exegetical and biblical theological syntheses of George Eldon Ladd, who went even further in calling for a new evangelical vision of the Kingdom, usually riling both dispensational premillennialists and covenant amillennialists in the process.¹³³

In Moore's estimation, the consensus for which Henry pled has begun to emerge:

Remarkably, the move toward a consensus Kingdom theology has come most markedly not from the broad center of the evangelical coalition, as represented by Henry or Ladd, but from the rival streams of dispensationalism and covenant theology themselves. Progressive dispensationalists, led by theologians such as Craig Blaising, Darrell Bock, and Robert Saucy, have set forth a counterproposal to almost the entire spectrum of traditional dispensational thought. With much less fanfare, but with equal significance, a group of covenant theologians, led by scholars such as Anthony Hoekema, Vern Poythress, Edmund Clowney, and Richard Gaffin, has also proposed significant doctrinal development within their tradition.¹³⁴

In the absence of an adequate theology of the Kingdom, Moore sees promising signs of an emerging consensus that would place KT as the central focus of evangelicalism. He promotes inaugurated eschatology along with an anticipation of a future Kingdom as the means to bring evangelicals together, i.e., the "'already/not' eschatological framework of Ladd."¹³⁵ He commends progressive dispensational theologians for systematizing an inaugurated eschatology with a clear "already" facet that is quite similar to the one proposed by Henry and constructed by Ladd.¹³⁶

In the covenantal camp of evangelicalism, Moore thinks that the emerging consensus was not as noticeable: "The move toward an 'already/not yet' framework of eschatology by

¹³²Ibid., 21.

¹³³Ibid., 22.

¹³⁴Ibid., 23.

¹³⁵Ibid., 39.

¹³⁶Ibid., 40.

evangelical theology's covenantal Reformed tradition was not as noticeable as the developments within dispensationalism.¹³⁷ Covenantalists already had a theory of an inaugurated eschatology. Their move came in recognizing that the present soteriological stage of the Kingdom is an initial stage of a future eschatological consummation:

Thus, for Gaffin and likeminded Reformed theologians, the Kingdom present is not an exclusively soteriological matter pointing to an eschatological consummation. It is itself a manifestation of an initial fulfillment of the promised eschatological hope. "A global, elemental consideration, that comes from taking in the history of revelation in its organic wholeness, is the essentially unified eschatological hope of the Old Testament, a hope which, to generalize, has a single focus on the arrival of the Day of the Lord, inaugurated by the coming of the Messiah," Gaffin asserts. "From this perspective, the first and second comings, distinguished by us on the basis of the New Testament, are held together as two episodes of *one* (eschatological) coming."¹³⁸

Moore laments the fact that both dispensationalists and covenantalists miss the major point in identifying the seed of Abraham:

Until this point, both dispensationalist and covenantal evangelicals discussed the issue as though it could be abstracted from the purposes of God in the true Israelite, Jesus of Nazareth. . . . Both sides miss the impact of the mystery Paul is unveiling when he argues against the Judaizers that the "seed of Abraham" who inherits the kingdom promises is not plural but singular (Gal. 3:16a). Indeed, Paul explicitly identifies the "offspring of Abraham"—the Israel of God—as Jesus of Nazareth (Gal. 3:16b).¹³⁹

He criticizes dispensationalists for giving Israel a major role in the future millennium: "Dispensationalists, even progressives, mistakenly speak of the millennial Israel as having a 'mediatorial' role in dispensing the blessings of God to the nations. . . . The identification of Jesus with Israel—as her king, her substitute, and her goal—is everywhere throughout the apostolic understanding of the Old Testament promise."¹⁴⁰ He criticizes covenantalists for their use of "replacement theology": "As with the doctrine of salvation, this tension is resolved not by arguing for a 'replacement' of a Jewish nation with a largely Gentile church, but by centering on the head/body relationship between the church and Jesus, the true Israelite."¹⁴¹ Nevertheless, he

¹³⁷Ibid., 44.

¹³⁸Ibid., 47.

¹³⁹Ibid., 117.

¹⁴⁰Ibid., 118.

¹⁴¹Ibid., 149.

still has no place in his Kingdom program for a special role of national Israel.

Moore disapproves of interpreting Abraham's land promises to refer to the "spiritual" blessings of forgiveness of sins and eternal life.¹⁴² He prefers rather to side with Justin Martyr who saw "all the promises to Israel—both material and spiritual—as belonging to Jesus the Israelite—and therefore by legal inheritance to those who are united to Him as His 'brothers' (John 20:17, ESV; Heb. 2:11, ESV)."¹⁴³ When the disciples asked Jesus when He would restore the Kingdom to Israel (Acts 1:6), according to Moore, Jesus did not dodge their question. Rather, "He is the 'Immanuel,' the temple presence of God with the people (Matt 1:23; John 1:14; 2:19-21)."¹⁴⁴ National Israel has no future Kingdom, but Jesus does. Moore asks, "What does the resurrected Jesus inherit?" and answers, "The promises made to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (Acts 13:32-33). Thus, when dispensationalists speak of the 'future' of Israel, they should speak of it in terms of the 'future' of Jesus—a future He promises to share with His 'friends' (John 15:14-15)."¹⁴⁵

From the above survey, that Kingdom Theology has no place for referring Abraham's land promises to a plot of ground on the surface of the present earth is evident. Moore's case built on the new evangelicalism that arose after World War II is extremely interesting, but its use of Scripture is careless. It is another example of "hopscotch" exegesis, hopping from one text to another, never taking time to investigate the contextual meaning of each verse cited. His case is primarily lacking in its failure to examine the Gospels carefully to delineate in detail the different ways that Jesus spoke of the Kingdom during His time on earth.

Progressive Dispensationalism

The similarity between Progressive Dispensationalism and the covenant premillennialism of George Ladd has frequently been noted.¹⁴⁶ Yet Nichols sees the millennium of Progressive Dispensationalism as far more "Israelitish" than that of Ladd.¹⁴⁷ In investigating the land promise to Abraham, one must ask how much more Israelitish than covenant premillennialism is Progressive Dispensationalism. One feature that PD does have in common with the modified

¹⁴²Ibid., 119.

¹⁴³Ibid., 120.

¹⁴⁴Ibid., 119.

¹⁴⁵Ibid.

¹⁴⁶Ibid., 208 n. 126. See also Vernon S. Poythress, *Understanding Dispensationalists* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: P & R, 1994) 142, who writes, "The forces that their [i.e., progressive dispensationalists'] own observation have set in motion will most likely lead to covenantal premillennialism after the pattern of George E. Ladd."

¹⁴⁷Stephen J. Nichols, review of *Progressive Dispensationalism*, by Craig A. Blaising and Darrell L. Bock, *TrinJ* 15 (1994):255.

covenantal position is its willingness to combine the millennium and the eternal state into one dispensation, speaking of them as two phases of the one final future Kingdom.¹⁴⁸ What have they done with Israel's land promise?

Apparently, Craig Blaising and Darrell Bock merge Gentiles with Israel in Israel's future inheritance:

We can illustrate this progressive dispensational view of the church in the case of Jewish Christians. A Jew who becomes a Christian today does not lose his or her relationship to Israel's future promises. Jewish Christians will join the Old Testament remnant of faith in the inheritance of Israel. Gentile Christians will be joined by saved Gentiles of earlier dispensations. All together, Jews and Gentiles will share the same blessings of the Spirit, as testified to by the relationship of Jew and Gentile in the church of this dispensation. The result will be that all peoples will be reconciled in peace, their ethnic and national differences being no cause for hostility. Earlier forms of dispensationalism, for all their emphasis on the future for Israel, excluded Jewish Christians from that future, postulating the church as a different people-group from Israel and Gentiles.¹⁴⁹

In its emphasis on only one people of God, PD must make everyone, including Gentiles in the church and saved Gentiles from other dispensations, inheritors of Israel's promises. That does not make for a very "Israelitish" millennium. It rather merges everyone into the inheritance promised to Israel, or else it denies Israel what God had promised her.

From his perspective, Covenantalist Vern S. Poythress notes the dilemma of progressive dispensationalist:

The issue is whether it [i.e., the future "physical kingdom on earth"] is for believing Gentiles also. Do believing Jews at some future point have some distinctive priestly privileges or religious blessings *from which believing Gentiles are excluded*? Does the phrase "for Israel" in actuality mean for Israel and *not* for Gentiles"? Or does it mean, "for Israel and for believing Gentiles also, who inherit such blessings through union with Christ"? Classic dispensationalism insists on the former meaning. Covenant theology insists on the latter.¹⁵⁰

At this juncture, it appears that progressive dispensationalism agrees with covenant theology. Poythress continues,

Let us be more specific about the implications. Theoretically, one might imagine a

¹⁴⁸Craig A. Blaising and Darrell L. Bock, *Progressive Dispensationalism: An Up-to-Date Handbook of Contemporary Dispensational Thought* (Wheaton: Victor, 1993) 101-2, 116-23.

¹⁴⁹Blaising and Bock, *Progressive Dispensationalism* 50.

¹⁵⁰Poythress. *Understanding Dispensationalists* 135.

situation where, in the future kingdom, Jewish Christians live predominantly in the land of Palestine, whereas Gentile Christians live predominantly elsewhere. Such geographical distinctiveness does not in and of itself create a problem. However, dispensationalists want to find particular religious significance in one special land, the land of Palestine, as distinct from other lands. Canaan undeniably had such significance in the Old Testament period, because, I would argue, it typified the inheritance of the world in Christ (Rom. 4:13; Heb. 11:16).¹⁵¹

Apparently, PD again falls into the same position as covenant theology. Poythress does not distinguish between the millennium and the eternal state. Neither do Bock and Blaising, but George Ladd does.

Covenant theology has no place for Israel's inheriting the land that God promised to Abraham. Neither does PD, apparently. The response of PD to the land-promise issue is either silence or a mixture. Arnold G. Fruchtenbaum has sought information from PD advocates regarding their understanding of God's Land Covenant with Israel (Deut 29:1–30:20), and has found nothing.¹⁵² Blaising and Bock view the land covenant as part of the Mosaic Covenant.¹⁵³

Robert Saucy discusses the land promise extensively as part of the Abrahamic Covenant, but is inconsistent in his application of it.¹⁵⁴ He expands the "seed" promise to Abraham to include all those in union with Christ.¹⁵⁵ He then ties the land promise to the seed promise as a land needing occupants.¹⁵⁶ From that point, he develops extensively the position that the land promise must refer to the geographical territory originally promised to Abraham.¹⁵⁷ In concluding his discussion of the land, he writes, "Thus the land aspect of the Abrahamic promise retains validity in the New Testament. . . . There is no evidence that the promise of the land has been either completely fulfilled historically or reinterpreted to mean a symbol of heaven or the blessing of spiritual life in general."¹⁵⁸ Yet he then goes on to say, "The spiritual position of

¹⁵¹Ibid., 136.

¹⁵²"The Land Covenant," in *Progressive Dispensationalism: An Analysis of the Movement and Defense of Traditional Dispensationalism*, ed. Ron J. Bigalke Jr. (Lanham, Md.: University Press of America, 2005) 96-97.

¹⁵³Blaising and Bock, *Progressive Dispensationalism* 142-43.

¹⁵⁴Ron J. Bigalke Jr., *Progressive Dispensationalism: An Analysis* 53.

¹⁵⁵Robert L. Saucy, *The Case for Progressive Dispensationalism: The Interface Between Dispensation & Non-Dispensational Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1993) 44.

¹⁵⁶Ibid.

¹⁵⁷Ibid., 45, 47-48, 50-56.

¹⁵⁸Ibid., 56-57.

being ‘in Christ’ in no way cancels out the reality of a real material universe, which is also the inheritance of the believer with Christ.”¹⁵⁹ What is the land, then? Is it what God promised to Abraham, or is it the whole earth? Who are the “seed” of Abraham who will inherit the land? Abraham’s physical descendants or all who are in Christ?

At best, PD sends a mixed message regarding the land promised to Abraham. At worst, it denies the fulfillment of the promise altogether.

Dispensationalism

Impact of Dispensationalism

The position of Dispensationalism in regard to the land promise made to Abraham has been summed up as follows:

The Abrahamic Covenant, and the sub-covenants of land, seed and blessing, is fulfilled in the thousand-year kingdom period. The Jews will be in the land as fulfillment of the promise. The clear biblical teaching is that the Son of David will be reigning and ruling as promised on the literal throne of David in Jerusalem. Jews and Gentiles, who enter the kingdom in their natural bodies are redeemed and blessed by the earlier work of Christ on the cross.¹⁶⁰

When God promised Abraham that his seed would inherit *this* land, Abraham understood God’s words the same way that Adam understood God’s words in Gen 2:16-17: “From any tree of the garden you may eat freely; but from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat from it you will surely die.” In a sinless environment, Adam accurately transmitted what God had told him to Eve, because Eve’s response to the serpent reflected such accuracy: “From the fruit of the trees of the garden we may eat; but from the fruit of the tree which is in the middle of the garden, God has said, ‘You shall not eat from it or touch it, or you will die’” (Gen 3:3). In a sinless environment, Eve’s repetition of God’s instructions to her husband could not have been a distortion or an exaggeration. She did not report verbatim what Moses recorded in Gen 2:16-17, but probably chose words from a more extended discussion between God and Adam that was not recorded. She committed no sin of misrepresentation at this point; her sin came a little later when she acted on the serpent’s suggestion to eat of the forbidden fruit. Before that suggestion, no distorted interpretation had occurred. The first hermeneutical error in understanding what God had said came in the serpent’s suggestion: “You surely will not die! For God knows that in the day you eat from it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil” (Gen 3:4-5). The serpent imposed a certain preunderstanding of the words on Eve, perhaps something like “God

¹⁵⁹Ibid., 57.

¹⁶⁰Ron J. Bigalke Jr. and Mal Couch, “The Relationship Between Covenants and Dispensations,” in *Progressive Dispensationalism: An Analysis of the Movement and Defense of Traditional Dispensationalism* (Lanham, Md.: University Press of America, 2005) 36

just gave you life by creating you; surely He will not take it away.” Unfortunately, Eve and Adam took his bait and the sad result is history.

At that point in history, national Israel had no existence. National Israel came into existence the moment that God said to Abram, “Go forth from your country, And from your relatives And from your father’s house, To the land which I will show you; And I will make you a great nation, And I will bless you, And make your name great; And so you shall be a blessing; And I will bless those who bless you, And the one who curses you I will curse. And in you all the families of the earth will be blessed” (Gen 12:1-3). After Abram had obeyed, God became more specific regarding the land: “To your descendants (lit, seed) I will give this land” (Gen 12:7a).

How was Abram to understand God’s words? They were plain enough. Historically, the geographical location was quite specific in this and later wordings of the land promise. Dispensationalism interprets the words as God intended them and as Abram understood them. No typology. No spiritualizing. No symbolism. No preunderstanding of how the words must fit into a system of theology. No reading back into the words later special revelation. To take the words in any other sense than what God intended and Abraham understood is a distortion. Though Abram’s environment was no longer sinless, God was still perfectly capable of communicating clearly. He cannot lie and must be taken at His word. Abram understood God correctly, and so Israel became a nation chosen by God in possession of a particular plot of land on the present earth’s surface.

Poythress who argues for a heavy use of typology in the OT would say a conclusion as to how God intended his promise to Abraham must be suspended because Scripture is not that precise and often includes ambiguities that are only clarified later when Scripture is fulfilled. He explains,

In particular, does he [i.e., Ryrie] think that the significance of an Old Testament type may go beyond what can be seen in the original Old Testament context? Some, perhaps most, interpreters with an orthodox view of biblical inspiration would say yes. The argument would be as follows. God knows the end from the beginning. Therefore, as the divine author of the Bible he can establish a relation between the type and its antitypical fulfillment. Since the fulfillment comes only later, the type becomes richer than what is available by ordinary means in Old Testament times. In other words the divine intention for a type may, in certain cases, be richer than what one can obtain by grammatical-historical interpretation. Such richness, properly conceived, will not *violate* grammatical-historical meaning, or go contrary to it. The richness will arise from the added significance to the type when it is compared to the fulfillment.¹⁶¹

Poythress is mistaken in saying that if “the type becomes richer than what is available by ordinary means in Old Testament times,” it does not violate grammatical-historical meaning. He is wrong. Grammatical-historical meaning is set by the historical context in which words are spoken, never to be changed or added to. Adding meaning to the promises God made to

¹⁶¹Poythress, *Understanding Dispensationalists* 90-91.

Abraham or changing that meaning does violate the grammatical-historical meaning just as the serpent added and/or changed the meaning of the words God spoke to Adam and Eve.

Poythress' explanation assumes that the promises to Abraham were ambiguous and needed clarification, which they did not.

God's land covenant in Deut 29:1–30:20 with Israel reaffirmed the land promise that God made to Abraham.¹⁶² The land promise to Abraham receives confirmation throughout the OT (e.g., Deut 30:5; Isa 27:12-13; Jer 31:1-5, 11-12; Ezek 20:42-44; 28:25-26; 34:25-26; 36:8-11, 28-38; Joel 3:18; Amos 9:13-15).¹⁶³ Even PD advocate Robert Saucy concurs that the NT continues to imply the validity of the land promise though it does not do so as explicitly as the OT.¹⁶⁴ As noted earlier, New Covenant theologian Reisinger agrees regarding the OT focus on the land promise, but disagrees regarding the NT.¹⁶⁵ By reading the NT back into the OT—specifically Heb 4:11—he takes the land promise of the OT to be a pledge of something greater, the spiritual rest promised to the believer.¹⁶⁶ To say that the land promise had already been fulfilled in Joshua's day (Josh 21:43-45)¹⁶⁷ will not suffice because in David's day, a long time later, fulfilment of the land promise was still future (1 Chron 16:13-18).¹⁶⁸

If PD and New Covenant Theology agree that in the OT the land promise pertained to precisely the geographical territory that God stipulated to Abraham, that confirms the case of dispensationalism. The question then turns on whether the NT ever reversed that promise or spiritualized it into something else. Covenant Theology, New Covenant Theology, Kingdom Theology, and PD—PD for the most part—say that it did. Dispensationalism would reply that nothing of the sort occurred. From Matthew through Revelation God's promises to Israel hold true. The only question is, Which generation of Israel will receive those promises? Certainly not the generation alive when Christ became a man, came to His own, and those who were His own did not receive Him (John 1:11). Christ Himself told that generation, “The kingdom of God shall be taken away from you, and shall be given to a nation bringing forth the fruits thereof” (Matt

¹⁶²Fruchtenbaum, “Land Covenant” 88.

¹⁶³Even PD proponent Robert Saucy is specific in noting the continuation of the land promise to Abraham throughout the rest of the NT (Saucy, *Case for Progressive Dispensationalism* 47-48).

¹⁶⁴Ibid., 50-57.

¹⁶⁵Reisinger, *Abraham's Four Seeds* 39-40. See also n. 41 above.

¹⁶⁶Ibid., 87, 91-92; cf. also Michael W. Adams, “In Defense of the New Covenant: A Theological Response to Richard Barcellos' Book, *In Defense of the Decalogue: A Critique of New Covenant Theology*, <http://www.ncbf.net/PDF/Defense.pdf> (accessed 7/12/06), 9.

¹⁶⁷Adams, “In Defense of the New Covenant” 8-9.

¹⁶⁸Reisinger, *Abraham's Four Seeds* 90-91.

21:43). Referring to “a nation bringing forth the fruits thereof,” He spoke of a future generation of Israel that will repent and fully embrace Him as the Messiah.

When He offered His contemporary, fellow-Jews the fulfillment of Abraham’s promises, they resisted Him, causing Him to broaden His offer of spiritual blessings to the rest of humanity. Paul notes this transition in beneficiaries: “I say then, they did not stumble so as to fall, did they? May it never be! But by their transgression salvation has come to the Gentiles, to make them jealous. Now if their transgression is riches for the world and their failure is riches for the Gentiles, how much more will their fulfillment be!” (Rom 11:11-12).

When Jesus instituted the Lord’s Supper, He worded His explanation of the cup to include not just Israel, but all people: “for this is My blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for forgiveness of sins” (Matt 26:28); “This cup which is poured out for you is the new covenant in My blood” (Luke 22:20); “This cup is the new covenant in my blood” (1 Cor 11:25). That Jesus by this statement expanded the group to be benefitted by the redemptive aspects of His sacrifice is evident from two features. (1) Jesus said His blood of the covenant—the new covenant, of course—was shed for *many*, not just for Israel. The adjective Β=88™ < (*pollōn*) has a “comprehensive sense” in Matt 26:28 just as it does in Matt 20:28.¹⁶⁹ It carries the force of “all” the same as Βζ<θT< (*pantōn*) does in 1 Tim 2:6 (cf. Rom 5:15, 19). In wording His statement this way, Jesus thereby extended certain benefits of the new covenant beyond the boundaries of Israel. (2) Paul quoted Jesus’ words instituting the Lord’s Supper in writing to a predominantly Gentile church (1 Cor 11:25). Here again is another indication of the extension of certain benefits beyond the scope of national Israel. The applicability of that to Gentiles in the church indicated that Jesus was extending those benefits to others who are not Israelites. The extended benefits of the new covenant were not all-encompassing, but rather pertained at least to the forgiveness of sins. Jesus never extended the land benefits of the Abrahamic covenant to anyone else. Those belonged exclusively to the generation of national Israel who at His second coming will embrace Jesus as Israel’s promised Messiah.

That fulfillment of the land promises to Israel remains in place is evident. A future generation of Israel who repent and receive Jesus as the Messiah will enjoy the benefits of that land-promise provision of the Abrahamic Covenant, the objections of postmodern hermeneutics notwithstanding.

POSTMODERN BLUR OF PROPOSITIONAL PROPHECY

Postmodernism has cast its spell on propositional truth in biblical prophecy in at least two ways. It has raised questions (1) about whether anyone can confidently affirm specific teachings about the future and (2) about maintaining a distinction between dispensational and covenantal teachings regarding the millennium.

¹⁶⁹W. D. Davies and Dale C. Allison Jr., *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to Saint Matthew* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1997) 3:95, 474; Donald A. Hagner; *Matthew 14–28*, vol 33B of Word Biblical Commentary, eds. David A. Hubbard and Glenn W. Barker (Dallas: Word, 1995) 583, 773.

Tentativeness Versus Certainty

In a widely used volume on evangelical hermeneutics, the authors furnish an illustration and then apply it to the interpretation of biblical prophecy:

Stephen Travis offers a helpful human illustration of this point [i.e., that the OT promise of land to Abraham takes on new meaning, instead of the land of earthly Palestine, “a better country—a heavenly one”]. He compares God to a loving parent who, knowing his children’s expectations, delights in outdoing them. A little girl may expect a doll for Christmas, but the doll she receives—one that walks, talks, weeps, and wets—far exceeds her expectations. She gets what she wanted—a new doll—so continuity connects her expectations with their fulfillment. She does not feel deceived by the difference between them but happily surprised. Likewise, God’s fulfillment of some prophecies may exceed the expectations his people have of them.

For readers today this illustration indicates that we should resist the popular tendency to interpret prophecy as if it were a written script that God was obligated to follow. God’s purposes certainly do not change, and we may expect him to adhere to much of the prophetic design. But as he has in the past, he may ad-lib some unexpected lines. Hence, as we said earlier, Bible students should interpret prophecy tentatively rather than dogmatically. Our God is a God of surprises, and he may still have some left!¹⁷⁰

Stated in another way, we cannot be sure about the Bible’s teaching regarding the future. Postmodernism encourages a tentative handling of biblical prophecy.

In commenting on varying views on eschatology, Klein, Blomberg, and Hubbard (hereafter KBH) write, “Perhaps one or more parties are ‘creatively’ interpreting the texts. This does not deny the above possibilities, but rather may legitimize the view that several options are not only possible but also valid in such interpretive stalemates.”¹⁷¹ They continue,

Amillennialist and premillennialist Christians need to embrace each other and their postmillennialist fellow-believers. One may say, “I don’t agree with your conclusions, but in light of who you are and your community of faith, in light of how these biblical texts have been interpreted throughout history, and in light of the diligence and care with which you attempt to understand and live in conformity to the Bible’s teachings, I concede your interpretation. You have responded to the Bible in a valid manner.”¹⁷²

¹⁷⁰William W. Klein, Craig L. Blomberg, and Robert L. Hubbard, Jr., *Introduction to Biblical Hermeneutics* (Dallas: Word, 1993) 309.

¹⁷¹Ibid., 143.

¹⁷²Ibid., 151.

Here is a classic example of postmodernism. As it were, “Your conclusion contradicts mine, but both conclusions are valid.”

We both can set our own criteria for what truth is, and we both are right. Absolute truth is not a reality because its standards must be set by each individual; in other words, it is not absolute. I suggest that confidence rather than tentativeness is justified and even necessary in regard to certain biblical truths.

In making two simple requests regarding the historical reliability of the Synoptic Gospels, I have encountered severe criticism from the camp of evangelical historical criticism. My first request was, “Please name an evangelical historical critic who has done extensive work in the Synoptic Gospels who has not as a result of that methodology sacrificed historical accuracy at one point or another.”¹⁷³ Rather than name a person as requested, a responder raised the question of what does historical accuracy mean?¹⁷⁴ Is there more than one definition of historical accuracy? Grammatical-historical interpretation says, “No,” but postmodernism says, “Yes.” My second request was, “Tell us, to which evangelical should we look as a final authority on what in the Synoptic Gospels is historical and what is not.”¹⁷⁵ That contemporary evangelical scholars do not agree among themselves about the historicity of various parts of the Gospels is conspicuously evident. Instead of naming one whose work could be viewed as an authority, the responder accused me of assuming the role of “final authority,”¹⁷⁶ apparently because I look upon historical facts in the Gospels as a fixed entity, something one can view as absolutely true. Even though he professes to view the Bible as inerrant, my responder has apparently drunk deeply of the waters of postmodernism. For him historical facts as recorded in the Gospels are not fixed and we need not speak of them as though they were. My responder even proceeded to imply that I was not exemplifying a “hermeneutic of humility.”¹⁷⁷ For the postmodernist, everything is tentative. If one dares to express certainties in interpreting Scripture, he is not practicing a “hermeneutic of humility” and is manifesting his pride, according to postmodernism.

I suggest that a trust in the inerrancy of Scripture is a matter of conviction, not pride. If one cannot be sure about the meaning of plain statements of Scripture, what is left to be sure about? In recent times, evangelicals have spilt much ink in discussing and practicing a “hermeneutic of humility.” Introducing his commentary on Revelation, Osborne writes, “Thus in interpreting the symbols of the book, we first need the “hermeneutics of humility” to realize

¹⁷³Robert L. Thomas, “Historical Criticism and the Evangelical: Another View,” *JETS* 43/1 (March 2000):108.

¹⁷⁴Grant R. Osborne, “Historical Criticism: A Brief Response to Robert Thomas’s ‘Other View’,” *JETS* 43/1 (March 2000):116.

¹⁷⁵Thomas, “Another View” 108.

¹⁷⁶Osborne, “A Brief Response” 116.

¹⁷⁷*Ibid.*, 117.

that we “see things imperfectly as in a poor mirror” (1 Cor. 13:12 NLT). We are to center on the purpose of the text and note the theological thrust, leaving what will actually happen with God.”¹⁷⁸ According to Osborne, we should not try to tie the symbols of the Apocalypse to modern events.¹⁷⁹ To do so would be too specific, too dogmatic. We must be satisfied to remain tentative in interpreting the book.

Vanhoozer adds to this postmodern chorus:

Deconstruction, together with the varieties of hermeneutic suspicion, performs a valuable service in checking interpretive pride. I readily grant this point. Yet I have also argued that the humiliation of meaning and interpretation that results from this undoing is not the same as interpretive humility. Humility, I have suggested is a specifically Christian contribution to hermeneutics.¹⁸⁰

He continues, “The postmodern crisis in interpretation is actually a legitimation crisis. Whose voice, which interpretation, what aim counts, and why?”¹⁸¹ Vanhoozer goes on to contrast a “hermeneutics of the cross” and a “hermeneutics of glory,” and says, “Those who read according to the hermeneutics of glory revel in their own interpretive skills, impose their interpretive theories on texts, and eclipse the text’s own meaning.”¹⁸²

Vanhoozer displays his infection with the postmodern virus in his words about eschatology. He writes, “[E]schatology puts into question a fundamentalist (foundationalist) epistemology that aspires to absolute truths and objective certainties.”¹⁸³ Speaking of the task of interpreting the written Word, he states, “There is an eschatological tension that must not be ignored, a tension that prohibits us from thinking that the truth—the single correct interpretation—is our present possession.”¹⁸⁴ He describes another way in which eschatology raises questions about fundamentalist interpretation: “the fundamentalist tendency to resist figural interpretation” and the way fundamentalists insist “that passages about Israel concern the

¹⁷⁸Grant R. Osborne, *Revelation*, in Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2002) 16.

¹⁷⁹Ibid.

¹⁸⁰Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in this Text? The Bible, the Reader, and the Morality of Literary Knowledge* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998) 464.

¹⁸¹Ibid.

¹⁸²Ibid., 465.

¹⁸³Ibid., 429.

¹⁸⁴Ibid.

physical nation Israel and never the church.”¹⁸⁵ Specifically, he opines, “The hermeneutics of dispensationalism is insufficiently sensitive, I believe, to the literary sense of the text (in this case, to the literary genres of prophecy and apocalyptic).”¹⁸⁶ As far as Vanhoozer is concerned, what the Bible says about the future must remain an open question.

Tying his view on eschatology in with his words about hermeneutical humility, this scholar concludes,

Here I need only add that one should pursue the quest for the single correct interpretation under the aegis of hope and its reminder “not yet.” That the meaning and significance of a text are never a present possession, but a partially fulfilled promise, is perhaps sufficient antidote to the poison of prideful interpretation.¹⁸⁷

Vanhoozer’s strong words about “the poison of prideful interpretation” make ludicrous his accompanying discussion of the “hermeneutics of conviction,” which sees that “while absolute knowledge is not a present possession, adequate knowledge is.”¹⁸⁸ One wonders how a person can have strong convictions about the the meaning of biblical teachings that is not presently in his possession.

Postmodernism’s effect on biblical hermeneutics has been to render the Bible’s teaching on prophecy at best as tentative and at worst as nonexistent. As I have noted elsewhere, it goes hand-in-hand with modern linguistic’s proclivity to render the Bible’s meaning as unattainable because of the frailties of human understanding.¹⁸⁹

“Premillennialism” Versus Premillennialism

One of the spells cast by postmodernism has educated people believing that they can assign their own definitions to classically defined terminology. In the general realm of biblical interpretation, I have commented on this before,¹⁹⁰ but a recent example relates specifically to Bible prophecy. Several years ago, I asked a well-known evangelical scholar, whose reputation as an amillennialist was widespread, about his recent change to join the faculty of an evangelical seminary whose statement of faith required its faculty to hold a premillennial position. In

¹⁸⁵Ibid.

¹⁸⁶Ibid., 429-30.

¹⁸⁷Ibid., 465.

¹⁸⁸Ibid., 465-66.

¹⁸⁹Thomas, *Evangelical Hermeneutics* 201-3, 226-32. The effect of modern linguistics on Vanhoozer is pronounced, so much so that I classify his hermeneutical method as grammatical-historical-philosophical-linguistic.

¹⁹⁰Ibid., 20-28.

response to my question about how he could teach at a premillennial institution, he replied, “It depends on how you define the millennium.”

In more recent study, I have learned how generally prevalent among evangelicals is the practice of making no distinction between the millennium and the eternal state. Covenant theologians are merging the two together so that they can now call themselves “premillennialists.” Furthermore, progressive dispensationalists have joined them in merging the millennium with the eternal state as one final dispensation. Moore sings the praises of both groups for bringing about a consensus to support his kingdom theology position.¹⁹¹

Rather than distinguishing between the millennium and the eternal state, for the sake of simplicity and flexibility, Blaising and Book combine the two into one dispensation that they call the “Zionist” dispensation.¹⁹² Similarly, Poythress summarizes the covenantal position:

Now what about the Millennium? What are we to expect in the future? . . . In principle this fuller consummation of all things, described in Revelation 21:1–22:5, or in a “silver” age, commonly called “the Millennium,” distinct from both the consummation and from the present time. . . . The language of Revelation 21:1–22:5 indicates that the consummation will be the greatest fulfillment of the bulk of Old Testament prophecy. . . .

The emphasis on the new earth helps to bring the traditional millennial positions closer to one another. If all are able to agree that the new earth represents the most intensive fulfillment, arguments about fulfillments of a lesser scope will seem to be less crucial.¹⁹³

Noting the similarity between the PD and covenantal positions regarding the millennium and eternal state, Poythress comments further: “In fact, some modified dispensationalists [i.e., PD advocates] agree with the points made in the whole of this chapter. So, provided we are able to treat the question of Israel’s relative distinctiveness in the Millennium as a minor problem, no substantial areas of disagreement remain.”¹⁹⁴

The cozy agreement between PD and recent covenantal positions in merging the millennium and the eternal state has a marked deficiency: it ignores the biblical text of Revelation 19:11–21:5. In particular, two elements of the text prevent a merging of the two eras.

First, the last eight scenes of the passage, each introduced by *kai eidon* (“and I saw”), are chronologically successive, a factor necessitating that the eighth scene (21:1-5) follows the fifth scene (20:4-10). As I have pointed out elsewhere,¹⁹⁵ the eight scenes are [1] the second coming

¹⁹¹Moore, *Kingdom of Christ* 43-44, 51.

¹⁹²Blaising and Bock, *Progressive Dispensationalism* 121.

¹⁹³Poythress, *Understanding Dispensationalists* 47.

¹⁹⁴Ibid., 50.

¹⁹⁵Robert L. Thomas, *Revelation 8–22: An Exegetical Commentary* (Chicago: Moody,

of Christ (19:11-16), [2] the summons of the birds to a human feast (19:17-18), [3] the slaughter of Christ's human opponents (19:19-21), [4] Satan's imprisonment (20:1-3), [5] Satan's release and final defeat (20:4-10), [6] setting of the great white throne (20:11), [7] sentencing to the lake of fire (20:12-15), and [8] sketch of the new Jerusalem (21:1-8).

The return of Christ [1] must happen first, or else the invitation to the birds of prey [2] is pointless. The invitation to the birds [2] must occur before the defeat of the beast [3] in order for the birds to be present when the slaughter occurs (19:21b). The binding of Satan [4] must transpire before the millennium and his release at the end [5] to account for his inactivity during the millennium. All the first five scenes must take place before the appearance of the great white throne [6], because they relate to the old earth and heaven which depart when that throne appears. The great white throne [6] must be in place before it can be a scene for judging those absent from the book of life [7]. The judgment of the lost [7] must come before the new heaven and the new earth [8] to explain the absence of all evil from the new creation. More broadly speaking, the second coming of Christ [1] is clearly the earliest of the series in its fulfillment, with the new creation [8] coming conspicuously last. The millennium and its associated events [4 and 5] are obviously antecedent to the events of the great white throne [6 and 7] because they pertain to the present creation. In his interesting exposition of Revelation 19:1–21:5, MacLeod concurs in general with the chronological sequence of scenes,¹⁹⁶ though he divides the scenes a little differently.

The chronological sequence in the fulfillment of these scenes is obvious to most, but a covenantalist such as Poythress would probably reply that such an approach is too rational to be probable. After all, he objects to dispensationalism's "scientifically precise language" in relation to the existence of unconditional covenants between God and Israel.¹⁹⁷ Covenantalists live in a world of generalities and shun specifics regarding biblical prophecy. For them, therefore, the arrival of postmodernism's blurring of clear statements in the Bible is a welcome addition. Such a cultural climate gives them more ammunition in their battle against dispensationalism.

Second, fulfillment of most OT prophecies regarding the future must transpire on the earth as presently known. They cannot be fulfilled in the new heavens and the new earth because the present earth will not longer exist. Poythress is mistaken when he writes, "The language of Revelation 21:1–22:5 indicates that the consummation will be the greatest fulfillment of the bulk of Old Testament prophecy."¹⁹⁸ With only a few exceptions, OT prophecy about matters yet future pertains to the present order of creation, an order that will be nonexistent upon the arrival

1995) 580-82.

¹⁹⁶David J. MacLeod, "The Seven 'Last Things,'" *BibSac* 621-628 (January-March 1999–October-December 2000), e.g., "The Third 'Last Thing': The Binding of Satan (Rev. 20:1-3)," *BibSac* 624 (October-December):472-73, also n. 16 on 472-73.

¹⁹⁷Poythress, *Understanding Dispensationalists* 62.

¹⁹⁸*Ibid.*, 47.

of the new creation.¹⁹⁹ Though some see only a renovation of the present earth, the same observation must hold. The earth will be different from the one that is presently known and envisioned in OT prophecy.

The clear biblical distinction between the millennial period and the new heaven and the new earth is decisive, and any attempt to merge the two into a newly defined “premillennialism” are antibiblical and must be ruled as misleading and deceptive, another result of postmodern hermeneutics.

THE MUDDIED STATE OF POSTMODERN BIBLICAL STUDIES

We have surveyed how every person is doing right in his/her own eyes in the postmodern world of evangelical hermeneutics. In sampling recent criticisms of the Princeton scholars and nineteenth-century dispensationalism, we saw the postmodern blurring of the rationality and precision of Scripture. We then took a look at how the postmodern blur is generating a middle-ground mania among evangelicals. Next, we took two samples of how postmodernism has sought to obliterate propositional truth in the realm of Bible prophecy.

In our postmodern culture, evangelicals may still call their hermeneutics by the familiar “grammatical-historical” terminology, they have endowed familiar expression with an entirely different meaning. In the eyes of today’s world, such a gathering as the Pre-Trib Study Group is a textbook example of “the poison of prideful interpretation” because it bases its existence on the certainties of what the Bible says about the future. But in the eyes of the God of the Bible, it is a dose of health-giving vitamins for today’s church of Jesus Christ. May God bless this organization in the fulfillment of its mission of spreading the truth of the imminent return of Christ and the end-time events to follow.

¹⁹⁹MacLeod, “The Seventh ‘Last Thing’: The New Heaven and the New Earth (Rev. 21:1-8),” *Bib Sac* 628 (October-December):440-42; Thomas, *Revelation 8–22* 439-40.