

## Evaluating Premillennialism

(Part IV)

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### ***The Hermeneutic of Literalism***

One of the characteristic features of Dispensationalism is its insistence upon a 'literal' reading of the Bible. Throughout its history many of its advocates have alleged that alternative millennial views reflect a low view of the Scripture's authority because they do not follow this hermeneutic.<sup>1</sup> Especially when it comes to the prophecies of the Bible that relate to the earthly people of God, Israel, dispensationalists insist that these be read literally. It is often argued that alternative readings of these prophecies undermine the authority of the Bible by illegitimately spiritualizing them and their promises.

This emphasis upon a literal hermeneutic is closely linked to the dispensationalist distinction between God's earthly people, Israel, and his heavenly people, the church. It is argued that the prophecies and promises of the Bible that relate to Israel must correspond to Israel as a distinct people. Because Israel is a national and ethnic entity with a literal, concrete identity and history, whatever Scriptural promises refer to her must be equally literal and concrete.<sup>2</sup> Thus, if the Scriptures are to be rightly interpreted,

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<sup>1</sup> Here and throughout this section I am using the term 'hermeneutic' in the basic sense of a method or approach to the reading of the Bible. Dispensationalism is characterized by a particular hermeneutic, or way (following certain rules or principles) of reading the biblical texts, one which especially stresses the principle of a literal reading.

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, Ryrie, *Dispensationalism Today*, pp. 86—109, 132—55.

they must always be taken in their literal meaning, unless this proves to be impossible.

## I. WHAT IS 'LITERAL'?

In order to evaluate the dispensational hermeneutic of literalism, it is necessary to define more precisely what is meant by a literal reading of the Bible. Opinions vary among dispensationalists themselves as to what it is.

It is interesting to observe that even in the case of Scofield and the classic form of Dispensationalism, the emphasis upon a literal hermeneutic was somewhat qualified. According to him, the historical books of the Bible are not only literally true but often also of allegorical or spiritual significance. An historical event, like the relationship between Isaac and Ishmael, is literally true, but it may also have further meaning and significance (see *Gal.* 4:23—31). However, in the case of the prophetic books of the Bible, Scofield insisted that:

we reach the ground of *absolute literalness*. Figures are often found in the prophecies, but the figure invariably has a literal fulfillment. Not one instance exists of a 'spiritual' or figurative fulfillment of prophecy. . . . Jerusalem is always Jerusalem, Israel always Israel, Zion always Zion . . . . Prophecies may never be spiritualized, but are always literal.<sup>3</sup>

This is a strong statement. It declares that all the prophecies in the Scripture have a literal fulfillment, so that whenever they are not interpreted literally, but figuratively, their meaning is necessarily distorted. However, the statement also concedes, at least with respect to historical passages, that the events recorded may be interpreted also in terms of their spiritual meaning.

Among later dispensationalist authors, further attempts have been made to define what is meant by a literal hermeneutic. Two representative definitions have been given by Charles C. Ryrie in his *Dispensationalism Today*<sup>4</sup> and Paul Lee Tan in his *The Interpretation of Prophecy*.<sup>5</sup>

Ryrie gives the following account of the dispensationalist position: 'Dispensationalists claim that their principle of hermeneutics is that of literal interpretation. This means interpretation which gives to every word the same meaning it would have in normal usage, whether employed in writing, speaking or thinking.'<sup>6</sup> In his exposition of this claim, Ryrie goes on to argue that 'normal usage' is really the equivalent of a grammatical and

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<sup>3</sup> Cyrus I. Scofield, *The Scofield Bible Correspondence School, Course of Study* (7th ed., 3 vols.; no place or publisher given), pp. 45—46 (as cited by Vern S. Poythress, *Understanding Dispensationalists* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1987], p. 24).

<sup>4</sup> Chicago: Moody, 1965.

<sup>5</sup> Winona Lake, Indiana: BMH Books, 1974.

<sup>6</sup> *Dispensationalism Today*, p. 86.

historical interpretation of the text. It takes words in their normal, plain or ordinary sense. Tan's definition of this hermeneutic is quite similar: 'To "interpret" means to explain the original sense of a speaker or writer. To interpret "literally" means to explain the original sense of the speaker or writer according to the normal, customary, and proper usage of words and language. Literal interpretation of the Bible simply means to explain the original sense of the Bible according to the normal and customary usage of its language.'<sup>7</sup>

Like Ryrie, Tan maintains that a literal reading of the biblical texts is equivalent to a grammatical-historical reading, a reading that simply takes the words and language of the text in their ordinary, common and plain meaning.

Despite these variations, the primary claim of Dispensationalism is that the biblical texts should be read in their plain, ordinary, or literal sense, especially when these texts speak of God's earthly people, Israel, and when they make promises respecting Israel. Though the presence of non-literal and figurative language is not completely denied — Scofield even acknowledged the possibility of spiritualizing interpretations of historical events — the first rule for any reading of a biblical text is that it be read in the most literal way possible.

## **II. EVALUATING THE HERMENEUTIC OF LITERALISM**

Undoubtedly, dispensationalist authors differ considerably on the subject of a literal reading of the Bible. Variations are evident between the earliest and classic forms of Dispensationalism, and more recent revisionist and progressive forms. However, we will take the two definitions cited as a fair representation of the predominant view among dispensationalists.

When considering these typical definitions of what constitutes a literal hermeneutic, two problems immediately stand out.

### ***LITERAL AND PERHAPS SPIRITUAL***

The first problem is the tacit acknowledgement that a literal reading of the text need not exclude a spiritual meaning or figurative and symbolical language. In the original position of Scofield himself, a somewhat arbitrary distinction is made between the historical and prophetic texts in the Bible. This distinction is made in order to allow for the possibility that the historical texts may have both a literal and a spiritual meaning. Though Scofield maintains that this is never possible in the case of prophetic texts, there seems to be no reason why this cannot be the case. Why can historical texts that speak of Jerusalem have a spiritual meaning, while prophetic texts that speak of Jerusalem must invariably have a literal meaning? Furthermore, the possibility of non-

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<sup>7</sup> *The Interpretation of Prophecy*, p. 29.

literal elements indicates that it is somewhat simplistic and misleading to insist that texts always be read literally.

## LITERAL BUT NOT REALLY LITERAL

A second and even more fundamental problem with these definitions is the attempt to identify 'literal' with a grammatical-historical reading of the text, which in turn is identified with taking words in their normal or plain meaning. The problem with this approach is that it begs the question of what 'literal', 'normal', or 'plain' strictly mean. This can be illustrated by considering the meaning of the word 'literal'.

The 'literal sense' is a translation of the Latin *sensus literalis* which means 'the sense of, according to the *letter*'. That is to say, texts are to be read as language and literature according to the rules that ordinarily and appropriately apply to their usage and forms. This means that if the text is poetry, it should be read, according to the letter, as poetry. If the text is historical narrative, recounting events that occurred in a particular time and place, it is to be read as historical narrative. If the text uses forms of speech — symbols, figures, metaphor, simile, comparison, hyperbole, etc. — it is to be read according to the letter, treating such forms in the appropriate manner. The basic idea is that when the biblical texts are read in terms of their literal meaning, they are to be read in accordance with all of the appropriate rules and norms.

For Dispensationalism to begin with a commitment to the 'literal, plain or normal reading of a text' entirely begs the question as to what that sense is. To say that the literal meaning of biblical prophecy and promises must always be the most plain, concrete and obvious meaning, is to prejudge the meaning of these texts before actually reading them 'according to the letter', that is, according to the rules that obtain for the kind of language being used.

It has been common since the time of the Protestant Reformation to speak of a grammatical-historical reading of the biblical texts. This is one that takes the words, phrases, syntax and context of the biblical texts seriously — hence, grammatical — and also takes the historical setting and timing of the texts into careful consideration — hence, historical.

This approach was set over against the common Medieval approach to the biblical texts that distinguished, in addition to the literal or historical meaning of a text, three further levels of meaning: the tropological (moral), the allegorical, and the anagogical (ultimate or eschatological) sense.<sup>8</sup> Against this Medieval fourfold sense of the biblical texts, the

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<sup>8</sup> On the basis of this fourfold sense of the biblical texts, a reference to water could mean literally, a colourless liquid; morally, the need for purity; allegorically, baptism by water; and analogically, the eternal life in the heavenly Jerusalem. Or, to use another common example, Jerusalem could mean literally, the city in Palestine; morally, the

Reformers spoke of the *sensus literalis*, the literal sense of the text. This means that a text is to be read according to the rules of language and grammar, and pertinent historical circumstances, in order to discover its literal (and only) meaning.<sup>9</sup>

This demonstrates in principle the illegitimacy of Dispensationalism's understanding of what is involved in a literal hermeneutic. But because this is such an important matter, we will illustrate it more concretely by way of three problem areas: first, the relation between Old Testament prophecy or promise and its New Testament fulfillment; second, the subject of biblical typology; and third, the oft-repeated claim that non-dispensationalists illegitimately spiritualize the biblical promises regarding the new earth. Each of these problem areas shows how unworkable and unhelpful it is to say that a literal reading looks for the plain or normal sense of the biblical texts.

### III. PROPHECY AND FULFILMENT

The first problem area is Dispensationalism's treatment of Old Testament prophecies and their fulfillment. Here the insistence upon a literal reading of the biblical texts, especially the prophecies, actually masks the more basic claim that only earthly or non-spiritual promises can be made to an earthly people. Because the promises to Israel are always and necessarily earthly and literal, they may not be directly applied to the church. Dispensationalism would collapse, as a method of reading biblical prophecies, were it shown that the promises made to Israel in the old covenant find their true and final fulfillment in the new covenant church.

The problem here is that the New Testament repeatedly refers the Old Testament prophecies and promises made to Israel, to the church. Whatever the previous fulfillments of Old Testament prophecy may have been, they reach their ultimate fulfillment in Christ, in whom all the promises of God have their 'yes' and their 'amen' (2 Cor. 1:20). This can be illustrated with several examples.

Among the most basic promises in all of Scripture is the promise made by the Lord to Abraham, that 'in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed' (*Gen. 12:3*). This promise is repeated in Genesis 15, where Abraham is promised descendants as numerous as the stars of the heavens (verse 5), and then in Genesis 17, where Abraham is promised a seed and is said to be the father of a multitude of nations (verse 4). In the New Testament account of the fulfillment of this promise, especially in the Apostle Paul's treatment of it in Galatians 3 and 4, it is expressly stated that this promise has been fulfilled in Christ. Not only is Christ the seed of promise, the One in whom these earlier promises to Abraham are fulfilled, but all who belong to Christ,

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need for heavenly-mindedness; allegorically, citizenship in heaven; and analogically, the Jerusalem of the new heavens and the new earth.

<sup>9</sup> Speaking against this Medieval teaching of a fourfold sense, the *Westminster Confession of Faith*, chapter 1.9, states that 'the true and full sense of any Scripture. . . is not manifold, but one'.

whether Jew or Gentile, are also Abraham's seed. In gathering, through the gospel, believers from every tribe and tongue and people and nation, the Lord's promise to Abraham is literally fulfilled. However, the dispensationalist's view is that this can be at best only a secondary application, not the literal fulfillment, of the promise to earthly Israel. This view contradicts the Apostle Paul's teaching that all Jewish and Gentile believers are the seed of Abraham and co-heirs of the promise.<sup>10</sup>

Similarly, the promises made during the old covenant to King David find their fulfillment in the coming and kingship of Jesus Christ, David's Son and his Lord. In the announcement of Jesus' birth through the angel to the virgin Mary, the angel is recorded to have said to her: 'And behold, you will conceive in your womb, and bear a son, and you shall name Him Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High; and the Lord God will give Him the throne of His father David; and He will reign over the house of Jacob forever; and His kingdom will have no end' (*Luke* 1:31—33). This passage, when read literally, says that the child to be born is the fulfillment of the Lord's promise in *2 Samuel* 7:13—16 (cf. *Psa.* 89:26,27), the promise that David's Son would be seated forever upon the throne of his father David. However, Dispensationalism in its classic form teaches that this Davidic kingdom is an exclusively earthly kingdom, a kingdom reserved to the period of the millennium (a thousand years) and for the earthly people of God, Israel. Not only does this understanding fail the test of being a literal reading of the biblical descriptions of the promise of a Davidic kingdom (a thousand years is not forever), but it also seems far less a plain reading of the text than the one ordinarily adopted by non-dispensational interpreters — that Christ's coming is the beginning of the fulfillment of the promise made earlier to David.

One other biblical promise that illustrates the problem of Dispensationalism's treatment of biblical prophecy is the promise of a restored temple. *Ezekiel* 40—48 extensively describes the future rebuilding of the temple after Israel's restoration from her captivity. This description speaks in detail of the dimensions of this rebuilt temple, as well as of the variety of sacrifices that will be offered in it, including sin offerings. In the dispensationalist reading of this prophecy, this refers to the literal rebuilding of the temple in Jerusalem during the millennial kingdom. However, this creates a problem of how to interpret the language describing the reinstatement of the sacrificial system, at a time after the coming of Christ and the accomplishment of redemption through his once-for-all sacrifice upon the cross. In the *New Scofield Reference Bible*, it is conceded that this language need not be taken literally: 'The reference to sacrifices is not to be taken literally, in view of the putting away of such offerings, but is rather to be regarded as a

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<sup>10</sup> In the previous section dealing with the relationship between Israel and the church, the argument offered for rejecting any sharp separation between them is closely related to this biblical understanding of the fulfillment of the promises to Israel in the new covenant.

presentation of the worship of redeemed Israel, in her own land and in the millennial temple, using the terms with which the Jews were familiar in Ezekiel's day.<sup>11</sup>

The admission that some elements of Ezekiel's prophecy regarding the rebuilt temple need not be taken literally is fatal, however, to the claims made by Dispensationalism for a literal reading of prophecy. The same reason that leads the dispensationalist to read the language about sacrifices in this passage in a non-literal way — because it would lead to conflict with other portions of Scripture — could equally well apply to other aspects of the prophecy. Indeed, the Word of God does indicate the fulfillment of this prophecy, but not in the literal sense of a rebuilt temple in Jerusalem during the period of the millennium.<sup>12</sup>

These are only some examples of the way Dispensationalism fails to acknowledge the fulfillment of many of the Old Testament prophecies to Israel in the coming of Christ and the gathering of his church during this present age. Rather than allowing the New Testament's understanding of the fulfillment of prophecy to determine its viewpoint, Dispensationalism operates from the prejudice that no promise to Israel could, in the strict sense of the term, ever be literally fulfilled in connection with the church. But this is a prejudice based upon an unbiblical dichotomy between Israel and the church.

#### **IV. BIBLICAL TYPOLOGY AN ACHILLES' HEEL?**

A second and related problem area, the interpretation of biblical types and shadows, is in some ways the Achilles' heel of the dispensationalist's literal hermeneutic.<sup>13</sup> Biblical types may be loosely defined as those events, persons, or institutions in the Old

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<sup>11</sup> The *New Scofield Reference Bible*, note on Ezekiel 43:19. This note represents a change from the original *Scofield Reference Bible*, which says: 'Doubtless these offerings will be memorial, looking back to the cross, as the offerings under the old covenant were anticipatory, looking forward to the cross. In neither case have animal sacrifices power to put away sin (Heb. 10:4, Rom. 3:25)' (note on Ezekiel 43:19).

<sup>12</sup> The dispensationalist claim that the temple will be rebuilt in Jerusalem during the millennium presents a number of problems: first, even were there no sacrifices reinstated or perhaps only memorial sacrifices offered, as some dispensationalists have suggested, Christ could not minister in this temple because he is not a priest 'according to the order of Levi' (cf. Heb. 7:14); second, Ezekiel says nothing about the rebuilding of the temple during the period known as the millennium; and third, the prophecy of the temple's rebuilding is a prophecy of the dwelling of the Lord in the midst of his people that is described in Revelation 22. Dispensationalism misinterprets this prophecy because it has an improper view of biblical types and shadows in relation to their fulfillment, a subject to which I will turn below.

<sup>13</sup> For a critical evaluation of Dispensationalism's handling of biblical typology, see Poythress, *Understanding Dispensationalists*, p. 111—17.

Testament, that prefigure or foreshadow their New Testament realities.<sup>14</sup> In the instances of such biblical types, the Old Testament type is fulfilled in its typical and symbolical meaning by the New Testament reality. Thus, if it can be shown that many of the historical events, persons, and institutions which were integral to the Lord's administration of the covenant of grace in the Old Testament, foreshadowed events, persons, and institutions in their new covenant reality and fulfillment, Dispensationalism, as a method of biblical interpretation, would seem to be seriously imperiled.

Though many examples of biblical types could be cited, three are especially problematic for Dispensationalism: the temple, Jerusalem, and the sacrifices.

We begin with the typology of the temple because it is with this that we concluded the previous section on prophecy. In the teaching of the Scriptures, the temple (earlier, the tabernacle) of the Lord is the place of his peculiar dwelling in the midst of his people. The temple was the focal point for the worship of Israel, the place where the people of the Lord could draw near to God as their sins were atoned for by means of the sacrifices instituted in the law. Speaking of the tabernacle's significance in the Old Testament, Geerhardus Vos, in his *Biblical Theology*, remarks:

The tabernacle affords a clear instance of the coexistence of the symbolical and the typical in one of the principal institutions of the Old Testament religion. It embodies the eminently religious idea of the dwelling of God with His people. This it expresses symbolically so far as the Old Testament state of religion is concerned, and typically as regards the final embodiment of salvation in the Christian state. . . . That its main purpose is to realize the indwelling of Jehovah is affirmed in so many words [*Ex. 25:8; 29:44, 45*].<sup>15</sup>

In its typical significance, the temple was a shadow or type of the reality of the Lord's dwelling with his people. According to the New Testament, this reality is now found in Christ himself (*John 1:14; 2:19—22; Col. 2:9*) and in the church as the place of God's dwelling by the Spirit (*Eph. 2:21—22; 1 Tim. 3:15; Heb. 3:6; 10:21; 1 Pet. 2:5*). Christ and the church are the fulfillment of the symbolical and typical significance of the temple. Moreover, in the final state of consummation, when the Lord dwells forever in the presence of his people in the new heavens and earth, it is expressly taught that there will no longer be any temple for the Lord will dwell in their midst (*Rev. 21:22*).

The dispensationalist insistence that the temple is an institution which pertains, in its literal form, peculiarly to Israel, fails to appreciate its typical significance in biblical

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<sup>14</sup> T. Norton Street, *How to Understand Your Bible*, rev. ed. (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity, 1974), p. 107, gives the following useful definition of a biblical type: 'A type can be defined as a divinely purposed, Old Testament foreshadowing of a New Testament spiritual reality.'

<sup>15</sup> Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1948 (and UK edition, Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1975), p. 148.

revelation. The idea that the temple would be literally rebuilt and serve as a focal point for the worship of Israel during the period of the millennium represents, from the point of view of the progress and unfolding of biblical revelation, a reversion to Old Testament types and shadows. From this point of view, Dispensationalism turns back the clock of redemptive history.

A similar misunderstanding of biblical typology also characterizes the dispensationalist's treatment of 'Jerusalem', or 'Zion'. In the Old Testament, Jerusalem, or Zion, is the city of David, the theocratic king, and symbolizes the rule of the Lord in the midst of his people. Jerusalem is the city of the Lord's anointed, the place of his throne and gracious rule among his people. It is the 'city of God' (*Psa.* 46), the place where children are conceived and born to the Lord (*Psa.* 87). It is the city to which the nations, whom the Lord has promised to give to David's Son as his rightful inheritance (*Psa.* 2), will come.

However, in the New Testament, we are taught that Jerusalem is now the 'heavenly Jerusalem'. For this reason, the writer to the Hebrews is able to say to new covenant believers: 'But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to myriads of angels, to the general assembly and church of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven' (12:22—23). This is also the reason the Apostle John can report the following vision of the heavenly Jerusalem as it will be at the close of the history of redemption: 'And I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth passed away, and there is no longer any sea. And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, made ready as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne, saying, "Behold, the tabernacle of God is among men, and He shall dwell among them, and they shall be His people, and God Himself shall be among them" (*Rev.* 21:1—3).

These kinds of passages describe for us the fulfillment of all that the Jerusalem of the old covenant typified and foreshadowed. They confirm the pattern of biblical typology: the literal Jerusalem of the old covenant is typical of the new covenant city of God, the church. The dwelling of the Lord in the midst of his people, the presence of the temple sanctuary, the throne of David — all of these find their fulfillment and reality in the new covenant blessing and consummation witnessed by the Apostle John in his vision on the isle of Patmos.

One further and closely linked instance of biblical typology is that of the sacrifices stipulated in the law of Moses, especially in the book of Leviticus. These sacrifices were symbols and types of the person and work of Jesus Christ, the high priest after the order of Melchizedek, who fulfils and perfects all that they foreshadowed. This is the principal argument of the book of Hebrews, which compares and contrasts the old covenant tabernacle, priesthood and sacrifices to their fulfillment and perfection in Christ. The types and shadows of the old covenant have been abolished, or better, find their reality and perfection in the realities of the new covenant:

Now the main point in what has been said is this: we have such a high priest, who has taken His seat at the right hand of the throne of the

Majesty in the heavens, a minister in the sanctuary, and in the true tabernacle, which the Lord pitched, not man. For every high priest is appointed to offer both gifts and sacrifices; hence it is necessary that this high priest also have something to offer. Now if He were on earth, He would not be a priest at all, since there are those who offer the gifts according to the Law; who serve a copy and shadow of the heavenly things . . . But now He has obtained a more excellent ministry, by as much as He is also the mediator of a better covenant, which has been enacted on better promises. . . When He said, 'a new covenant', He has made the first obsolete. But whatever is becoming obsolete and growing old is ready to disappear (*Heb.* 8:1—6, 13).

The point summarized in this passage and exhibited in the previous examples of biblical types constitutes what is being termed the Achilles' heel of the dispensationalist claim for a literal hermeneutic. Not only does this claim fail to do justice to the New Testament's teaching regarding the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy, but it also militates against the claim made by the inspired New Testament authors regarding the typological significance of the Old Testament sanctuary, priesthood and sacrifice: the reality of the new covenant renders the shadow obsolete and superfluous. The same principle, moreover, holds for all of the types and shadows of the old covenant administration. Once this principle is conceded, Dispensationalism's insistence upon a literal reinstatement of the types and shadows of the old covenant seems to be in serious conflict with the teaching of biblical typology.

## **V. WHAT ABOUT SPIRITUALIZING?**

The third problem area that remains to be considered is the dispensationalist claim that a non-literal fulfillment of the biblical prophecies and promises to Israel betrays a spiritualizing that cannot do justice to the biblical texts. According to Dispensationalism, many promises to Israel cannot be accounted for unless they are understood to be fulfilled literally and concretely during the period of the millennium to come.

Among such prophecies, dispensationalists often cite passages like Isaiah 11:6—10 and 65:17—25. Both of these prophecies are treated in the *Scofield Reference Bible* as predictions of the millennium, the one-thousand-year period of Christ's literal reign upon the earth from Jerusalem. This millennial reign represents the resumption of God's peculiar dealings with his earthly people, Israel, after the times of the Gentiles, the parenthesis period of the church, has concluded with the rapture and the following seven-year tribulation. According to Dispensationalism, these prophecies are a compelling proof that the prophecies of the Lord to Israel can have only a literal, concrete fulfillment. The language used in both passages, according to the dispensationalist, can only be understood to refer to a literal millennium or Davidic kingdom on earth.

However, a closer inspection of these two prophecies does not support this claim. In Isaiah 11:6—10, the prophet describes a beautiful picture of the reign of the shoot from Jesse. This reign will be characterized by universal peace and tranquility. In this kingdom, the Lord declares that ‘the wolf will dwell with the lamb, and the leopard will lie down with the kid . . . They will not hurt or destroy in all My holy mountain, for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea’ (verses 6, 9).

It is not evident that this describes the millennium of dispensationalist expectation. No mention is made of this being a period that will be limited in time, perhaps a period of one thousand years’ duration. More importantly, this passage speaks of a reign characterized by a universal peace and knowledge of the Lord. The millennium of dispensationalist expectation, by contrast, includes the presence of some people who do not acknowledge the Lord, and even a substantial rebellion at its close on the part of many against him — Satan’s ‘little season’. The description of Isaiah 11:6—10, accordingly, might better be referred to the final state of the ‘new heavens and earth’ than the millennium. Though this language is legitimately taken to describe the circumstance upon the earth — and not to be spiritualized in a non-earthly sense — it better describes the universal peace and knowledge of the Lord that will characterize the final state in the consummation than the earthly and Davidic kingdom of dispensational expectation.

The second of these prophecies, Isaiah 65:17—25, is somewhat more difficult to interpret. In the *New Scofield Reference Bible*, the first verse, which speaks of the new heavens and a new earth, is taken as a description of the final state, but the remaining verses (verses 18—25) are taken as a description of the millennium.<sup>16</sup> Thus, this passage is taken to be a description of both the final state and the millennium that will precede it. This reading has some plausibility, because verse 20 describes a time when infants will not be cut off after having lived only a few days, and when those who are older will not die prematurely. This verse expressly states that ‘the youth will die at the age of one hundred and the one who does not reach the age of one hundred shall be thought accursed’. Because death is mentioned in these verses, dispensationalists argue that it cannot refer to the final state.

Though this is a difficult passage, it may well be the case that, in this prophetic description of the new heavens and the new earth, this language is being used to describe the final state. If the language is pressed literally, it may seem to conflict with the biblical teaching that death will be no more in the new heavens and earth. But perhaps the language used is simply a way of figuratively or poetically affirming the incalculably long lives that the inhabitants of the new earth will live.<sup>17</sup> It should be observed that these verses also speak of the lives of the inhabitants being ‘as the lifetime of the tree’ (v. 22), suggesting an extraordinary longevity of life. Perhaps more

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<sup>16</sup> These verses are given the heading, ‘Millennial conditions in the renewed earth with curse removed’ (*New Scofield Reference Bible*).

<sup>17</sup> This language and suggestion is that of Anthony Hoekema, *The Bible and the Future*, (1979), p. 202.

significantly, these verses say that ‘the voice of weeping and the sound of crying’ will no longer be heard in Jerusalem, the very language used in Revelation 21:4 to designate the final state. The likeliest reading of these verses, therefore, is that they, from verse 17 through verse 25, describe in the language of present experience, something of the joy, blessedness, and everlasting life that will be the circumstances of God’s people in the new heavens and the new earth.<sup>18</sup>

In other words, these and similar texts have an appropriate place within a non-dispensationalist reading of the Bible. It is simply not the case that all non-dispensationalists spiritualize these prophecies and fail to take their description of renewed life on the new earth seriously. One does not have to be a dispensationalist to do justice to the concrete, earthy language used in these prophecies of the new heavens and earth. So long as it is understood that the final state requires a new heavens and a new earth, the richness and concreteness of the imagery in these biblical passages can be appreciated. Indeed, from one perspective, it could even be argued that to the extent that the dispensationalist millennium falls short of the blessedness of life in the new earth described in these passages, it becomes the more guilty of spiritualizing their language and meaning. So long as non-dispensationalists properly insist upon the restoration of the earth in the final state, they need not concede in the least the charge that they have illegitimately spiritualized the prophecies of Scripture regarding the final state.

## **Conclusion**

The dispensationalist claim regarding a literal interpretation of the Scriptures is really the product of its insistence upon a radical separation between Israel, God’s earthly people, and the church, God’s spiritual people. Without this undergirding assumption — that God has these two distinct peoples — there is no reason to deny the fulfillment of old covenant promises in the new covenant realities. Nor is there any longer reason to avoid the implications of biblical typology for the dispensationalist system.

Perhaps the most telling evidence against the dispensationalist hermeneutic is to be found in the book of Hebrews. The message of the book of Hebrews is, if I may speak anachronistically, a compelling rebuttal of Dispensationalism. Whereas the book of Hebrews is one sustained argument for the finality, richness and completion of all of the Lord’s covenant words and works in the new covenant that is in Christ, Dispensationalism wants to preserve the old arrangements intact for Israel, arrangements which will be reinstated in the period of the millennial kingdom.

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<sup>18</sup> Some postmillennialists would regard the description of these verses as referring to the millennium, the golden age that will precede the return of Christ and the final state. See, e.g., Davis, *Christ’s Victorious Kingdom*, pp. 37—8. Though this view does not include the dispensationalist understanding of a kingdom reserved to God’s earthly people, Israel, it does regard this passage as describing a period whose blessings fall short of the perfection of the final state.

However, this would be tantamount to going back to what has been surpassed in the new covenant in Christ, reverting to arrangements that have been rendered obsolete and superfluous because their reality has been realized in the provisions of the new covenant. The Mediator of this new covenant, Christ, is the fulfillment of all the promises of the Lord to his people. Thus, to the writer to the Hebrews, any reversion to the old covenant types and ceremonies would be an unacceptable departure from the realities of the new covenant in preference for the shadows of the old.

Though it may seem too severe to some, no other judgment is permitted us respecting the system of biblical interpretation known as Dispensationalism: it represents a continued attachment to the shadows and ceremonies of the old covenant dispensation and also a failure to appreciate properly the finality of the new covenant. Its doctrine of a literal hermeneutic proves not to be literal in the proper sense of the term. Rather than reading the New Testament 'according to the letter', Dispensationalism reads the New Testament through the lens of its insistence upon a radical separation between Israel and the church.

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