

OVERCOMING MILLENNIAL MADNESS

An introduction to the study of prophecy and end times

Class 3 – Hermeneutics and Eschatology

I. Three crucial hermeneutical issues in the evangelical divide over eschatology:

a. The validity of literal (grammatical-historical) interpretation.¹

“Literal interpretation has always been a marked feature of premillennialism. In dispensationalism it has been carried to an extreme. We have seen that this literalism found its most thoroughgoing expression in the claim that Israel must mean Israel, that it cannot mean the church, that the Old Testament prophecies regarding Israel concern the earthly Israel and that the church was a mystery unknown to the Old Testament prophets and first made known to the apostle Paul. Now if the principle of interpretation is adopted that Israel always means Israel, that it does not mean the church, then it follows of necessity that practically all of our information regarding the millennium will concern a Jewish or an Israelitess age.”² (O.T. Allis)

“We must frankly admit that a literal interpretation of the Old Testament prophecies gives us just such a picture of an earthly reign of Messiah as the premillennialist pictures.”³ (Floyd E. Hamilton)

“It is generally agreed that if the prophecies are to be taken literally, they do foretell a restoration of the nation of Israel in the land of Palestine with the Jews having a prominent place in that kingdom and ruling over the other nations.”⁴ (Lorraine Boettner)

i. Critiques:

1. Literal interpretation is unsustainable.

“Despite the vigorous assertions of dispensationalists, consistent literalism is an impossible ideal and unreasonable.”⁵ (Kenneth Gentry)

¹ Significant contribution to this material found in Brad Klassen, “Premillennialism and Hermeneutics”, MSJ 29/2 (Fall 2018) 127–55.

² Oswald T. Allis, *Prophecy and the Church* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1945), 244.

³ Floyd E. Hamilton, *The Basis of the Millennial Faith* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1955), 38.

⁴ Lorraine Boettner, “Postmillennialism,” in *The Meaning of the Millennium: Four Views*, ed. Robert G. Clouse (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1977), 95.

⁵ Kenneth L. Gentry, Jr., *He Shall Have Dominion: A Postmillennial Eschatology* (Tyler, TX: Institute for Christian Economics, 1992), 146.

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“The principle of ‘literal if possible’ is particularly misleading when used with apocalyptic literature, since it forces upon the literature an inappropriate, stringent idea of ‘literalism,’ wildly underestimating the pervasiveness of symbolism.”⁶ (Vern Poythress)

2. **“Literal” interpretation is unhelpful.**

“Besides being naïve, the dispensational claim to ‘consistent literalism’ is frustrating due to its inconsistent employment.”⁷ (Kenneth Gentry)

“The dispensationalist’s literalistic reading of prophetic passages must not be confused with a literal reading . . . It is amillennialists, not dispensationalists, who interpret prophecy literally, in that they follow the literal sense of how the writers of the new testament interpret old testament prophecy.”⁸ (Ken Riddlebarger)

b. **The nature of progressive revelation**

“It is difficult to think of any other problem that is more important or fundamental than the relationship between the testaments.”⁹ (John Feinberg)

i. **Critiques**

1. **The New Testament must reinterpret the meaning of the Old Testament.**

“Here is the basic watershed between a dispensational and a non-dispensational theology. Dispensationalism forms its theology by a literal understanding of the Old Testament and then fits the New Testament into it. A non-dispensationalist forms his theology by the explicit teaching of the New Testament.”¹⁰ (George Eldon Ladd)

“[The] amillennial position holds that the New Testament is the final arbiter of the Old Testament. We must interpret all Old Testament prophecy as do the writers of the new. We should place such prophecy in its redemptive-historical context if we are to interpret it correctly.”¹¹ (Kim Riddlebarger)

⁶ Vern S. Poythress, “Review of Robert L. Thomas, Revelation 1–7: An Exegetical Commentary,” WTJ 55, no. 1 (Spring 1993), 165.

⁷ Gentry, *He Shall Have Dominion*, 153.

⁸ Kim Riddlebarger, *The Case of Amillennialism: Understanding End Times* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003), 40.

⁹ Paul D. Feinberg, “Hermeneutics of Discontinuity,” in *Continuity and Discontinuity*, 110.

¹⁰ George E. Ladd, “Historic Premillennialism,” in *The Meaning of the Millennium*, 20–21.

¹¹ Riddlebarger, *A Case for Amillennialism*, 38.

2. **The New Testament must reaffirm the revelation of the Old Testament.**

There is no need to repeat what is copiously spread over the pages of the Scriptures. There seems to be lurking behind the demand a false principle, namely that we should not give heed to the Old Testament unless its content is repeated in the New. The correct principle however is that we should not consider as invalid, or worthy of discard, any of the Old Testament unless we are specifically told to do so in the New, as in the case of Law of Moses.¹² (S. Lewis Johnson).

“Progress in divine revelation is quite apparent in tracing through the books of the Old Testament chronologically. But progress in the sense, of only adding to what has been revealed, but not in any sense of a change of previous revelation. To change the substance of something already written is not progress, it is an alteration that raises questions about the credibility of the text’s original meaning.”¹³ (Robert Thomas)

c. The impact of theological presuppositions

“The straight forward, if provocative answer to that question is that it [Covenant Theology] is what is nowadays called a hermeneutic—that is, a way of reading the whole Bible that is itself part of the overall interpretation of the Bible that undergirds it. A successful hermeneutic is a consistent interpretive procedure yielding a consistent understanding of Scripture that in turn confirms the propriety of the procedure itself. . . . Once Christians have got this far, covenant theology of the Scriptures is something they can hardly miss.”¹⁴ (J.I. Packer)

II. Practical Considerations

- a. Context
- b. Read the Bible
- c. Read the whole Bible
- d. Read the whole Bible chronologically
- e. Read whole books of the Bible
- f. Familiarize yourself with the historical context
- g. Familiarize yourself with the outline of the book
- h. Stay in your passage
- i. Practice Biblical Theology
- j. Watch out for quoted passages; read the original passages in their context.

¹² S. Lewis Johnson, Jr., “Evidence from Romans 9–11,” in *A Case for Premillennialism: A New Consensus*, ed. Donald K. Campbell and Jeffery L. Townsend (Chicago: Moody Press, 1992), 223.

¹³ Thomas, “The Hermeneutics of Progressive Dispensationalism,” 90 n. 47.

¹⁴ J. I. Packer, *Revelations of the Cross* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1998), 9–10.