Hermeneutcs, Prophecy, and the Church

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I. Introduction

The principles of interpretation, known as hermeneutics, are essential to interpreting the text of Scripture and to identifying the overarching storyline of the Bible. Principles of interpretation are needed because the Bible is an ancient text which is separated from the modern reader in terms of distance, time, language, and culture. Evangelical scholars begin with the method of grammatical-historical exegesis to analyze both the original language and the cultural context of the text in order to properly understand Scripture.\(^1\) Grammatical-historical exegesis includes studying the context, grammar, semantics, syntax, and historical and cultural backgrounds of the text.\(^2\) The grammatical-historical method is a search for the “literal”, “normal”, or “plain” meaning Scripture which takes into account the use of figures of speech as a normal part of human language.\(^3\) Some theological systems only use the grammatical-historical method, and some theological systems use other principles of interpretation in addition to the grammatical-historical method. In fact, the differences in theological systems are largely the result of the rules by which these systems operate. The goal of this paper is to provide an overview of the hermeneutics of traditional dispensationalism, progressive dispensationalism, and progressive covenantalism, and to give particular attention to how proponents of each system understand the promises of Israel’s restoration and eschatological blessings in relation to the church as well as the fulfillment of the temple

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vision in Ezekiel 40–48. An evaluation and statement of my own views will appear at the end of the paper.

II. Hermeneutics

A. Hermeneutics in Traditional Dispensationalism

The essence of dispensationalism, according to Charles Ryrie, is the distinction between Israel and the church which grows out of the consistent use of the normal, literal, grammatical-historical method of interpretation of Scripture. The key word in Ryrie’s sine qua non of dispensationalism is “consistent”, and it is the consistent use of literal interpretation that distinguishes traditional dispensationalism from other theological systems such as covenant theology, progressive dispensationalism, and progressive covenantalism. The consistent use of literal interpretation is dependent upon the idea of stability of meaning in biblical texts, especially in regard to how the New Testament authors use the Old Testament. In other words, when the New Testament authors quote from the Old Testament, they do not read back into the Old Testament a new or expanded

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5 For Ryrie’s defense of consistent, literal interpretation, see Ryrie, Dispensationalism, 81-82; Johnson, “A Traditional Dispensational Hermeneutic,” 70-71.

6 Given the limits of this paper, covenant theology is not discussed here.

7 This claim of consistency has been challenged by progressive dispensationalists because traditional dispensationalists have sometimes argued for “spiritual” interpretations regarding a handful of items like the presence of a “mystery form” of the (spiritual) kingdom today and the identification of the Gentiles as the (spiritual) seed of Abraham in Galatians 3 (see Darrell L. Bock, “Response,” in Three Central Issues in Contemporary Dispensationalism: A Comparison of Traditional and Progressive Views, ed. Herbert W. Bateman IV [Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1999], 76-81; Herbert W. Bateman IV, “Dispensationalism Yesterday and Today,” in Three Central Issues in Contemporary Dispensationalism: A Comparison of Traditional and Progressive Views, ed. Herbert W. Bateman IV [Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1999] 36-ff). Though Johnson acknowledges no generation consistently applied this principle, he states that “the very premise of a biblically based theology of progressive revelation provided warrant for that hermeneutical procedure” (Johnson, “A Traditional Dispensational Hermeneutic,” 74).
meaning. If the Old Testament text is altered, then the original meaning of the text is lost. The Old Testament has priority in this sense, not the New Testament. Johnson, following Ryrie, argues that the rules of interpretation must be put into place before one’s theology is systematized. Christians should read the Bible using the common sense method of literal interpretation and then seek to form doctrines and fit those doctrines into a system of theology.

B. Hermeneutics in Progressive Dispensationalism

Like traditional dispensationalists, progressive dispensationalists use literal interpretation for much of the Bible. But unlike traditional dispensationalists, progressive dispensationalist Darrell Bock states that a principal-traditional approach such as that of traditional dispensationalism, where the rules of interpretation are laid down before looking at the text, is too rigid and does not allow certain texts to speak for themselves. In particular, Bock has in mind texts in which the New Testament author cites the Old Testament to teach something relevant for the church. Therefore, Bock proposes a

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“complementary” approach which considers literary and theological interpretations that complement the grammatical-historical meaning of a word or passage. He argues for a stable meaning in the Old Testament text along with “fresh associations” in the New Testament which are “canonically determined and defined.” This approach allows the Old Testament promises concerning Israel to stand and at the same time recognizes that the New Testament points out fulfillment for the church today. Thus, the New Testament “complements” the Old Testament and advances our understanding of it. Progressive dispensationalism also promotes “inaugurated eschatology” or the “already-not yet” principle of interpretation. Bock uses the example of Christian salvation which is both already (justification) and not yet (glorification) to establish precedence for this view. Finally, Bock denies that progressive dispensationalism allegorizes, spiritualizes, or appeals to sensus plenior or multiple meanings for Scripture.

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15 The term sensus plenior describes the “fuller meaning” or the “additional, deeper meaning, intended by God, but not clearly intended by the human author, which is seen to exist in the words of a biblical text (or group of texts, or even a whole book) when they are studied in the light of further revelation or development in the understanding of revelation” (Raymond E. Brown, The Sensus Plenior of Sacred Scripture [Baltimore: St. Mary’s University Press, 1955], 92). See also Douglas J. Moo, “The Problem of Sensus Plenior,” in Hermeneutics, Authority, and Canon, eds. D. A. Carson and John D. Woodbridge, (Grand Rapids: Baker: 1986), 175-211; Douglas A. Oss, “Canon as Context: The Function of Sensus Plenior in Evangelical Hermeneutics,” GTJ 9, no. 1 (Spring 1988): 105-127.
C. Hermeneutics in Progressive Covenantalism

Progressive covenantalism seeks to forge a *via media* between dispensationalism and covenant theology in order to better understand the overall structure of Scripture. Along with the common use of the grammatical-historical (literal) method of interpretation, progressive covenantalism proponent Stephen Wellum states that Scripture must be interpreted canonically because “the parts must be read in terms of the whole.”

Wellum argues that Scripture must be read on three horizons: the textual horizon of the immediate context which uses the grammatical-historical method of interpretation, the epochal horizon of God’s unfolding plan of redemption which recognizes types that culminate in Christ, and the canonical horizon which recognizes the promise-fulfillment motif across Scripture. This hermeneutic, while derived from the Scripture, is in place before one approaches the Scriptures. Finally, priority of interpretation is given to the New Testament when the Old Testament is quoted, and the New Testament authors may find a *sensus plenior* in the Old Testament which develops but does not contravene the Old Testament author’s understanding of God’s purposes.

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18 Ibid., 93-102.

19 Ibid., 85-86.
III. Israel’s Restoration and the Church Today

The next question to be addressed is, “Do the promises of Israel’s restoration and the eschatological blessings of the last days found in the prophets apply to the church today?” A related question is, “What do these texts teach us about the future of the nation Israel?” Before answering these questions, two points must be made. First, Christians from all theological camps must acknowledge that at least two promises from the Old Testament are operable today in the church: forgiveness of sins (Jer 31:34; Acts 10:43; Eph 1:7) and the gift of the Holy Spirit (Isa 44:3; Eze 36:27; 37:14; 39:29; Joel 2:28-29; Acts 2:17-18; Rom 8:9; 1 Cor 12:13). Additionally, all must acknowledge that the church today is operating under the new covenant" with Jesus Christ as the head of that covenant (Luke 22:20; 1 Cor 11:25; 2 Cor 3; Heb 8; 9:15; 12:24). How one explains these facts and whether or not there are additional promises in operation today varies from one system to another. Second, as stated above, it must be acknowledged that the differences among theological systems are rooted in hermeneutics, or the “rules of the game.” Thus, the reader must always keep hermeneutics at the forefront of the discussion.

A. Traditional Dispensationalism on Israel and the Church21

Traditional dispensationalists, governed by their commitments to consistent, literal interpretation and to the stability of meaning in the Old Testament texts, state that the unconditional covenants (Abrahamic, Davidic, and new)22 and related provisions

20 The idea among some dispensationalists that there are two new covenants – one with Israel and one with the church – will not be discussed here since this view is not held by Johnson or Bock. For more on this view, see Bateman, “Dispensationalism Yesterday and Today,” 31-34.

given to “Israel” in the Old Testament were meant for the nation of Israel and thus await fulfillment in the future. How does the traditional dispensationalist deal with the tension between the testaments regarding Israel’s covenantal blessings? Johnson makes a distinction between the institution of a covenant and the inauguration of a covenant: “To institute a promissory covenant is to introduce provisions of the agreement which are now available to be received. To inaugurate fulfillment is to keep all of the provisions of the agreement.”

The church experiences a provision of the Abrahamic covenant (the blessing from the provision of the Seed [Christ]), but the Abrahamic covenant was temporally inactivated during the Exile even though certain provisions continued to be fulfilled. Likewise, the Davidic covenant awaits a future fulfillment. The provision of an eternal house for the line of David has been kept during the times of the Gentiles, but the provisions of a throne and a kingdom will not be fulfilled until the Jews acknowledge God’s choice of Jesus as Messiah. The new covenant has been instituted, and the provisions of forgiveness of sins and the gift of the Holy Spirit have been offered, but the inaugural fulfillment awaits the national repentance of Israel (Rom 11:26-27).

For traditional dispensationalists, then, some provisions from Israel’s covenants are available

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22 It is important to note that while Johnson rightly labels the Abrahamic, Davidic, and new covenant as “unconditional”, he is well aware of the “shared responsibility” (conditions) of the covenant partners in the Abrahamic and Davidic covenants (Johnson, “Covenants,” 154). See also Michael A. Grisanti, “The Davidic Covenant,” TMSJ 10, no. 2 (Fall 1999), 240-43; Stephen J. Wellum, “‘Kingdom through Covenant’: A Biblical-Theological Summary,” in Kingdom Through Covenant: A Biblical-Theological Understanding of the Covenants, coauthored with Peter J. Gentry (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), 608-11.

23 For a survey and evaluation of different ways in which dispensationalists interpret the new covenant, see R. Bruce Compton, “Dispensationalism, the Church, and the New Covenant,” DBSJ 8 (Fall 2003): 5-9, 34-48.

24 Johnson, “Covenants,” 146.

25 Ibid., 138-47.
now for the church, but others await the return of Christ and the repentance of Israel, including the promises of land, the kingdom, and the throne of David. The promises to Israel have not been abrogated, and Israel, though in a state of unbelief, will experience national repentance and the promised kingdom (Rom 11; Acts 1:6) when the church will rule and reign with Christ for one thousand years (Matt 19:28; 2 Tim 2:12; Rev 5:10; 20:6).

B. Progressive Dispensationalism on Israel and the Church

Like traditional dispensationalists, progressive dispensationalists see a distinction between Israel and the church in God’s purposes, though to a lesser degree. Progressive dispensationalists recognize both continuity and discontinuity between Israel and the church. Bock argues that the covenants of promise (Abrahamic, Davidic, new) are linked together, and just as our salvation is an already-not yet process, so the fulfillments of the covenant promises are both for the church and for Israel. The covenants are “initially realized” in the church, and the covenants will reach a more complete fulfillment when Christ reigns on earth from Israel. This reflects the complementary hermeneutics of

26 Traditional dispensationalists differ over whether there is a mystery form of the kingdom present during the church age. This section follows Toussaint’s view that the kingdom of God is entirely futuristic (Stanley D. Toussaint, “Israel and the Church of a Traditional Dispensationalist” in Three Central Issues in Contemporary Dispensationalism: A Comparison of Traditional and Progressive Views, ed. Herbert W. Bateman IV [Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1999], 227-52).


28 Bock states that the church and Israel are separate structures in God’s plan, but there is no distinction at the theological-redemptive level since Abraham is the father of all believers and since the basis for redemption in every age is the work of Christ. In this view, all believers will participate in the total reconciliation with creation in the new heaven and new earth without distinction (Bock, “Hermeneutics,” 93).
progressive dispensationalism which makes “both-and” and “already-not yet” arguments. Bock argues for “an expansion within the boundaries of the covenant backdrop and message of Old Testament passages” so that the church is experiencing the fulfillment of the Israelite covenants today. Therefore, the church shares in the promises made to Israel as a covenant partner which explains why the New Testament authors so frequently quote the Old Testament and why covenant terminology is used with reference to the church (e.g., Eph 2-3; 2 Cor 3).\(^{30}\)

C. Progressive Covenantalism on Israel and the Church\(^{31}\)

Progressive covenantalist Stephen Wellum believes that the biblical covenants function as God’s means of establishing His kingdom rule on earth.\(^{32}\) With his emphasis on typology, Wellum argues that each of the covenant partners (Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses, Israel, and David) and the Old Testament covenants themselves are types of the Lord Jesus Christ and the new covenant respectively. Through Christ, each of the earlier covenants is fulfilled, and thus there is no future for the nation of Israel outside of the church. Israel is “typological of a greater Son, our Lord Jesus Christ” and anticipates the church.\(^{33}\) There is now only one people of God (Eph 2:11-22), and the land promises in


\(^{31}\) This section follows Wellum, “‘Kingdom through Covenant,’” 591-652.

\(^{32}\) This idea is not unique to progressive covenantalism. Covenant theologians and dispensationalists also recognize the connection between kingdom and covenant in God’s plan.

\(^{33}\) Ibid, 646.
the covenants and in the prophets are typological in that they point forward “to the
dawning of the new creation bound up with the new covenant age by Jesus.”\(^\text{34}\) The
kingdom of God has been inaugurated and is thus already here, although there is still an
“already-not yet” tension in New Testament eschatology in that full consummation of the
kingdom awaits the return of Christ followed by the eternal state.\(^\text{35}\) The new covenant
supersedes all previous covenants,\(^\text{36}\) and the church is living under the spiritual blessings
promised in the new covenant.

IV. Interpretation of Ezekiel’s Temple

As a case study, this section will briefly describe how Ezekiel’s temple vision is
interpreted by each theological system under consideration. Traditional
dispensationalists, using only the grammatical-historical (literal) method of interpretation,
believe that the temple, priesthood, sacrifices, festival, “prince”, and land divisions
described in the book of Ezekiel are literal.\(^\text{37}\) Since Ezekiel’s prophecy has never been
fulfilled historically, then it must have a future fulfillment, presumably during the
millennial reign of Christ. Although there are difficulties with the literal view such as the
identification of the “prince” and the nature and purpose of blood sacrifices in the
millennium,\(^\text{38}\) the vivid detail in Ezekiel 40-48 favors the literal interpretation. However,

\(^{34}\) Ibid., 607.

\(^{35}\) Ibid., 595-601.

\(^{36}\) Ibid., 604.

\(^{37}\) E.g., Charles Lee Feinberg, *The Prophecy of Ezekiel* (Chicago: Moody, 1969), 233-79; Randall

\(^{38}\) See the discussions in Price, *The Temple and Bible Prophecy*, 533-57; Jerry M. Hullinger, “The
Function of the Millennial Sacrifices in Ezekiel’s Temple Part 1,” *BSac* 167 (January-March 2010): 40-57;
166-79.
a literal reading of Ezekiel 40-48 is the basis for the dispensational view. Progressive dispensationalists presumably adopt this same view of Ezekiel’s temple vision.39

Progressive covenantalists adopt a non-literal interpretation of Ezekiel’s temple vision. Gentry states that Ezekiel’s temple vision is fulfilled in the new creation described in Revelation 21-22.40 The canonical reading of Scripture takes precedent over the grammatical-historical reading, and the temple functions as a type of Jesus who is the “true Temple” (John 2:18-22).41 Presumably, the land divisions in Ezekiel’s vision are typological of the New Jerusalem or the new earth.42 The problem with the typological, canonically-informed interpretation of Ezekiel 40-48 is that it does not do justice to the details of the vision. Broad, sweeping statements about typology cannot explain the vivid details of Ezekiel’s prophecy. Additionally, Ezekiel’s temple vision cannot be a type for the new creation described in Revelation 21-22 since there is no temple in the new creation (Rev 21:22).

39 I am not aware of any differences between traditional and progressive dispensationalists regarding the interpretation of Ezekiel’s temple. If a progressive dispensationalist applied the complementary hermeneutics to Ezekiel 40-48, then the temple may be fulfilled both in the body of Christ in a typological or spiritual sense for the church (1 Cor 6:19) and in the future in a literal sense for the nation of Israel, but I do not know of anyone who makes this argument.


42 Since Gentry only briefly mentions Ezekiel 40-48 in his book, it is difficult to know his exact position, though a literal fulfillment is certainly precluded by his belief that there is no future for Israel apart from the church.
V. Evaluation

The first point to make in evaluating theological systems is that every theological system approaches Scripture with interpretative rules in place. Consistent, grammatical-historical (literal) interpretation, though not always perfectly followed by its proponents, seems to be the only source of objectivity in interpretation since it locates meaning in the text. Therefore I favor the hermeneutics of traditional dispensationalism because of its aim at objectivity. I understand, to a certain extent, the complexities that arise when the New Testament authors cite the Old Testament, but I am still convinced that appealing to categories such as literal, typological, and analogical fulfillment can adequately explain the majority if not all of the quotations, references, and allusions to the Old Testament found in the New Testament. Regarding the biblical covenants, the kingdom, and the relationship between Israel and the church, I found the chapters from Johnson and Toussaint to be well articulated and convincing. I would state with Johnson that the church today participates in some of the provisions of the covenants with Israel, and I would state with Toussaint that the promised kingdom will be fulfilled in the future when Christ returns and when Israel turns to the Messiah. Finally, I believe that the temple vision in Ezekiel 40-48 will find a future, literal fulfillment in the millennial reign of

\[\text{\footnotesize 43} \text{ Bock criticizes traditionalists for this, but he fails to see that he has rules in place too. As Beacham states, “The assertion that no presupposed, universally applied rules should be brought to bear on every New Testament citation of Old Testament predictions is, itself, a presupposed, universally applied rule” (Roy E. Beacham, “Progressive Dispensationalism: An Overview and Personal Analysis,” DBSJ 9 [2004]: 19). Johnson also points out that both traditional and progressive dispensationalism operate by rules and definitions (Elliott E. Johnson, “Response,” in Three Central Issues in Contemporary Dispensationalism: A Comparison of Traditional and Progressive Views, ed. Herbert W. Bateman IV [Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1999], 102).}
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\[\text{\footnotesize 44} \text{ Though I am not an expert, I studied this subject in depth while at Dallas Theological Seminary and wrote my thesis on a related subject with Elliott Johnson as one of my readers.} \]
Christ. These conclusions are derived from consistency in grammatical-historical (literal) interpretation.

Regarding progressive dispensationalism, I understand Bock’s position that the New Testament authors appear to cite the Old Testament in ways that go beyond the original meaning of the text because there are many Old Testament passages that, when read in a normal or literal manner, imply that a promise or statement concerning the nation of Israel is applied to or fulfilled in the church.  However, I find Bock’s explanations at times difficult to understand, ambiguous, seemingly contradictory, and unwarranted. I do not see how adding the subjective component of literary-theological to the interpretative process contributes to theological certainty. I do appreciate progressive dispensationalists’ commitment to the original meaning of Old Testament.

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45 Even if the New Testament authors did read the Old Testament in a theological (non-literal) matter, without maintaining a tight correspondence between the Old Testament promise and the New Testament fulfillment, that does not mean that Christians today should turn that into a hermeneutic (already-not yet, both-and) because Christians are not infallibly inspired in the way that the New Testament authors were. We may observe their theological (non-literal) interpretations as valid, but we could never know if our own, additional theological interpretations were correct since we are not infallible.

46 Bock is frustrated that critics of progressive dispensationalism have either misunderstood or misrepresented his views (Bock, “Hermeneutics,” 105-108n2-3), but one wonders if so many alleged misrepresentations are not due to a lack of clarity in Bock’s articulation. I personally have had to reread Bock’s books and articles several times to try to understand the nuances he makes to traditional dispensationalism.

47 E.g., “Progressives have argued that what is originally said remains a relevant aspect of ultimate meaning” (Ibid., 90 [emphasis his]). What does “relevant aspect” mean?

48 For example, Bock argues for “stability” in meaning when the Old Testament is quoted in the New Testament, but he also argues for “fresh associations” and “change and advancement” (Ibid., 89-90). This appears to be contradictory. Bock explains that there is “expansion within the boundaries” of the Old Testament passages based on his complementary reading of the New Testament (Bock, “Response,” 157 [emphasis his]) instead of an expansion of the boundaries, but this seems confused. Expansion from within will itself push the boundaries further out. For example, if the promise of the New Covenant in Jeremiah 31:31-34 was only intended for Israel and Judah (and for none other), as the passage indicates, than an expansion of meaning which includes the church would be at the expense of the original promise since the original promise excluded all but Israel and Judah.

49 For example, Bock’s argument for his “already-not yet” hermeneutic on the basis of “already-not yet” aspects of salvation in Christ does not follow (see Johnson, “Response,” 205).
Testament covenants and promises which results in dispensational premillennialism, but I am not convinced that the “both/and” hermeneutic preserves the meaning of the Old Testament promises.

Progressive covenantalism is also inadequate in that it puts “the theological cart ahead of the hermeneutical horse.”50 Gentry and Wellum have constructed their hermeneutics too soon, and many promises of a future for the land51 and nation of Israel are ruled out in advance by the hermeneutics of canonical interpretation and typological fulfillment. Additionally, the statement that all of the covenants are now fulfilled in Christ is too simplistic and confuses Christ’s fulfillment of the Israelite (Mosaic) Covenant (Matt 5:17) with Christ’s fulfillment of the other covenants.52 The recognition of the “already-not yet” fulfillment of the covenants is an indication that the statement that “the new covenant supersedes all previous covenants” needs clarification. Finally, there is strong evidence from the New Testament that a distinction exists between Israel and the church as the people of God which militates against progressive covenantalism as a theological system.53

50 This phrase is borrowed from Richard L. Mayhue, “New Covenant Theology and Future Premillennialism,” TMSJ 18, no. 1 (Fall 2007): 222.

51 E.g., Jer 23:3, 7; 24:6; 31:12, 40; Eze 37:25; Joel 3:18-21; Amos 9:11-15.

52 Incidentally, Gentry and Wellum do not state how Christ fulfilled the Noahic Covenant.

53 In a review of the book, Bock rightly criticizes Gentry and Wellum for largely ignoring the passages which teach a future for the nation of Israel such as Matthew 19:28; Luke 21:23-24; Acts 1:6-8; 3:18-22; Romans 9-11 (Darrell L. Bock, “Kingdom Through Covenant: A Review by Darrell Bock,” The Gospel Coalition, http://thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/tgc/2012/09/11/kingdom-through-covenant-a-review-by-darrell-bock/ [accessed October 20, 2012]). Additionally, the distinction between Israel and the church will arguably exist in the eternal state since the New Jerusalem will have twelve gates with the names of the twelve tribes of Israel and a city wall with the twelve foundations according to the names of the twelve apostles (Robert L. Thomas, “The Mission of Israel and the Messiah,” TMSJ 8, no. 2 [Fall 1997]: 219).
VI. Bibliography


