

Dispensational Hermeneutics

1. Role of Hermeneutics

Hermeneutics provides guidelines to understand texts correctly. So, it is a matter of reading texts with comprehension and accuracy. This raises three questions at the core of the task of reading texts to consider for a Traditional Dispensationalism.

1. What is verbal meaning? This provides the goal of understanding.

The Literal Principle is the Author's/author's willed type meaning. The type meaning includes the recognition of the literary genre in the composition of the whole book.

2. How do we read a text? The hermeneutical circle addresses the method of reading to understand a text in context. This contextual reading involves a reading stage and a reasoning stage. The goal of the reading stage is the message, understanding the overall context. The goal of the reasoning stage is to outline the book, reasoning from the message to re-read of each section, in view of the overall message. Does each section contribute naturally to the sense of the whole? It may be necessary to refashion the overall message.

Three applications of the method have been central to the interpretation of Scripture: exegesis (read to understand a passage in an immediate context), exposition (read to understand the message in the whole book, as a basis for understanding each passage), and Biblical Theology (reads passages in the context of the progress of revelation in the canon of Scripture).

The hermeneutical circle is comprehensively applied in the task of exposition of whole books. The text is read according to the style, structure, and conventions of the overall literary genre, and then, in view of the understood message.

3. Is reading a text an objective or a subjective task?

In reading, following a circular pattern, would appear that the method is subjective. However, it is necessary that our method be objective because only that assures us that we are listening to what the Author/author is saying. It is also necessary because it allows us to legitimately compare two interpretations and weigh the evidence that favors the viable alternative interpretation that is correct.

By objective, I mean an Author/author is writing a trans-historical message capable of being read and understood by later generations who have access to the original language usage. Literature, law, and Scripture are recognized as trans-historical. It also means that the reader seeks to share the original language of a text, the presuppositions and preunderstandings from which the Author/author writes.

2. Problem to Consider in the Paper

The question to be addressed in this paper is whether Gen. 1-11 ought to be considered three initial dispensations or considered the setting for the history that follows in Genesis? I will try to make a case to show that it is the **setting**, which introduces **God's Promise** in Gen. 3:15. This **promise of Eve's Seed** is God's basic revelation in a fallen world, the Seed who will be struck by the serpent but in the end, the Seed who will strike the serpent in defeat.

This Promise is then **developed** in the first dispensation of history as the means by which God **manages** the Patriarch's lives to accomplish His purposes, beginning in Genesis 11:27ff. This is also the means of salvation.

These are the two related **aspects of the promise**:

the **promises to Abram** and to his descendants (seed plural) who will become a nation (12:1b-3a), by which God will manage the patriarchs of Israel, and the **promise of Abram's Seed** (seed singular) through whom all nations will be blessed (12:3b), by which any individual who believes God will declare righteous throughout human history. (15:6 and Rom. 4:3,4)

The three hermeneutical proposals provide modification or correction to what Ryrie has stated in *Dispensationalism* concerning a Dispensational Hermeneutics. I agree with what Frank Gaebelin has said, "Although I do not find myself in agreement with every aspect of Dr. Ryrie's presentation", I then add, yet I have found his sine-qua-non as foundational for my own understanding of a Dispensational Theology. The modification and correction will feature two aspects of his Dispensational Hermeneutics.

3. A Theological Dispensational Hermeneutics

a. First Question

Charles C Ryrie has a chapter; *The Hermeneutics of Dispensationalism*, in his final book, (*Dispensationalism*. Moody Press, 1995: 77-95) he views dispensationalism as a theological system based on a **literal hermeneutic**. So, his hermeneutic proposes a plain or literal use of language to be found in Scripture.

The first question is: Is this the **decision** for the reader to make? How is language used in the text. On the other hand, if there is to be communication with the author, then is it not a decision for the author to make as he writes?

An Evaluation of Ryrie's Consistent Literalism

Ryrie emphasizes that the theologian is to decide how to achieve a dispensational system.

(1). What authorizes the interpreter to decide how language ought to be used and thus how the text is to be read?

In biblical communication, does not the Author/author decide how language is used?

For the reader to decide the language usage, one may begin with a NT lexicon which includes a range of uses found in the Koine Greek period. The question is, what does the word in the text mean? Does one count in the word entry which meaning is most common and that is the normal or literal meaning? Or doesn't the reader seek what meaning is compatible with the authors' contextual usage? And that usage is found deduced from the contextual message, among the meanings found in the lexicon which are used in that historical period.

(2). A consistent Literal Hermeneutic does not preclude figures of speech or typology.

The question is: how does an exegete decide when there is a figure of speech or typology? Does that not require the use of the context rather than a simple lexical search for a figurative usage? And does not the context imply how the author uses the word in context? So, the context determines whether there is a figure of speech or a literal usage?

Therefore, does not this approach disagree with Ryrie's Literal Principle? On the other hand, if the Literal Principle is the Author's/author's contextual usage, it is a consistent usage in every consideration of a word usage.

b. Second Question

Now we turn to the problem posed in the introduction.

Evaluation of the interpretation of Genesis 1-11 as the first three Dispensations

(1). What is the definition of a dispensation?

Scofield-- In his original edition, a dispensation is a period of time during which man is tested in respect to obedience to some *specific* revelation of the will of God.

Ryrie-- *A dispensation is a distinguishable economy in the outworking of God's purpose.*

The two definitions are different in emphasis and clarity. But are they conflicting? Is an economy a distinguishable period of time? Is the outworking of God's purposes the testing of a man in respect to obedience in some specific revelation? The last comparison is not compatible.

(2). Do the first three satisfy either definition?

Innocence ---The word is too neutral as Ryrie acknowledged, (51) for they must possess creaturely holiness to be in the Garden. But at best, Adam was put in the garden. And in Genesis 1:3-3:6 Adam fails the test. So, what purpose of God is worked out in Adam's failure? Ryrie has accepted this change in definition to make this work, but the system is inconsistent.

Conscience---*This is a more appropriate title.* (Rom. 2:15) Ryrie states "this is the principal way God governed during this economy and obedience to the dictates of conscience was

man's chief stewardship responsibility... Man was responsible to respond to the promptings of his conscience and part of a proper response was to bring an appropriate blood sacrifice". (52,53) At this point in the narrative, their conscience was formed by God's command. (2:16,17) which was violated when Adam ate. (3:6,7) How does the dispensation extend to 8:4? No revelation of an appropriate sacrifice had been given yet? More important, how is a man saved? Is it by obedience to the command not to eat? or by faith in God's promise to provide a Seed (3:15), as Adam did believe in naming his wife "Eve"? (3:20) And Abel followed what God had provided (3:21) in his sacrifice. (4:4)

Noah found grace in His sight (6:8) so he and his family were saved physically in the ark (4:1-8:21) Does Noah receive grace due to his obedience to his conscience? Or does he find grace by believing God's promise as Seth and Enosh began to do?

Civil Government--Noah doesn't govern (9:1,2) as Adam had (1:26-28). How is human government a matter of God's rule when it is man's responsibility to govern? This isn't a dispensation. Man's national government operates by man's practice of capital punishment. It is a state which is no longer based on personal conscience but the state rules others to protect human life. This principle of Civil Government continues throughout human history until Christ returns in the Revelation of the Son of Man. (Daniel 7:9-14 and 7:26,27 and Revelation 20:4-6)

In conclusion, the first three dispensations just named are inordinately brief compared to the final four. In addition to the problems raised in the evaluations, there is an exegetical basis for the final four dispensations following the working out of God's purpose, which is absent in the first three. (Elliott Johnson, *Hermeneutics and Dispensationalism, in Walvoord a Tribute* (Moody Press, 1982, 239-245) That further confirms the evaluations reached. It is best to eliminate the first three as legitimate economies of God.

b. An Expositional Hermeneutic as the Basis for a Dispensational Theology

(1). As we read to recognize the working out of God's purposes in the progress of revelation is exegesis or exposition the most appropriate way to describe our task?

Exegesis interprets passages and problem passages in the immediate context, as studied in Departments of OT or NT Literature and Exegesis in Seminary Curricula.

The hermeneutic is grammatical/historical adopted from the Reformation for the practice of interpretation. The two categories of grammar and history arose in response to Roman Catholic hermeneutics: the grammar of the original language of the texts and the historical context of the original communication

Exposition is the interpretation of Biblical books as a whole. L. S. Chafer wanted an independent department at DTS in which whole books would be first read to gain an understanding of the message of the book and then every passage would be understood as a component part of the whole text supporting the truth expressed in the message.

The communicated meaning is defined as the Author's/author's willed type message, expressed in a whole book. The type of meaning is primarily the comprehensive literary genre of the whole book. While a given book may involve many forms of literature, one genre commonly comprehends the book, as in a narrative-history. This literary focus Ryrie added in his later discussion. (*The Hermeneutics of Dispensationalism*, pp. 19,79,80) He both acknowledged the promise and warned of the possible pitfalls of including that new approach.

An Expository Interpretation of Narrative History in Genesis 1-11

So, dispensational studies in the canon are initially the exposition of individual, narrative-historical books in the Bible. One of the pitfalls may be the confusing use of narrative as a genre of history, which is commonly applied to non-fiction rather than history. Robert Alter (*The Art of Biblical Narrative*) and V. Phillip Long (*The Art of Biblical History*) recognized Biblical history as an artistic composition with a realistic representation of what actually happened. Thus, the narrative art can be a historic composition. In this style of writing, the historical referent is not considered a photograph, but is a *simplified, selective, and suggestive* interpretation of what happened.

Genesis 1-11, as history has been recognized as *primeval-history* and Genesis 12-50 as *the history of the Patriarchs*. In a literary consideration of *Genesis*, the narrative-history presents the **setting of the history**, (1-11) which introduces the world in which the *Patriarchal History* (12-50) unfolds.

Setting is the first of a number of conventions in the composition of narrative history:

SETTING---This introduction of a narrative-history views the **space** in which historical actions and communication will take place. This is seen by the Author/author who specifies the realm of reality in which the characters will function.

POINT OF VIEW---Woven through the setting is the narrator's voice which expresses his perspective through which the reader observes and evaluates everything that will be included in the historical narrative.

PLOT---In a literary narrative, plot marks the succession of events, usually motivated by conflict, which generates suspense and leads to conflict resolution. This structure of actions in Biblical narrative are related to God's will. In other words, each successive event is related in a circular movement; the ideal (God) in conflict with the unideal (Satan), and man either falls in committing sin or arises in God's reconciliation of His own from sin.

CHARACTERS--- Another critical aspect of analysis is the examination of characters. Characters are real persons, including God so that we can come to know them, actually, but never exhaustively. The protagonist is the central character whose perspective carries most of the action. The antagonist blocks the desires of the hero. The foil is a character who serves as a contrast to other characters.

In Genesis, **GENEALOGIES** (*toladoth*) trace history through family lines of both the elect and the non-elect lines. Six *toladoth* are in Genesis 1-11 and four *toladoth* in Genesis 12-50. They imply that the author's intent is to present a historical account both in the primeval-history and in the patriarchal-history which has commonly been accepted as history.

The *toladoth* is a stated conventional marker which summarizes a historical series as particularly noted in Genesis. Yet in the interpretation of three dispensations in Genesis 1-11, none of these genealogic lines are noted nor included in the dispensations. In this Exposition of Genesis 1-11, all notations will be included to understand the Author's/author's willed type meaning in the setting.

Evaluation of Genesis 1-11 as the Setting for Genesis

Given that the TORAH involves four narrative- historical books, what would we expect the role of the **initial setting** to provide? Would we expect three dispensations of lost innocence, failed conscience, and violated human government? It wouldn't be that God's economies failed, would it?

Rather, it would be that when man failed, we would need to understand what God introduced to set the stage for the fulfillment of His purposes. And how would God involve Himself with His own people to assure that His will would be fulfilled, and mankind's sin would be overcome?

So, there is an essential need to understand **God's promise of the Seed** who would Himself be struck in order to bring about the ultimate judgment of the serpent. A summary of the sections in Gen. 1-11 presents the point of view which the reader needs to comprehend to understand the remainder of Biblical history.

The Points of View Unfolded in the Setting

In the Exposition of Genesis 1-11, five answers are introduced, one by the creation account, "In the beginning", and four by the *toladoth* sections. These appropriately describe the theological space in history where the Biblical narratives of the Patriarchs will unfold. These are found in Genesis 1-11 which actually defines a view of the world until an initial fulfillment of promise of the Seed in Christ's first advent.

(1). God's creation of the heaven and earth 1:1-2:3

The central character is **God who speaks the reality of creation into existence**. All human beings are created in His image to live and communicate with Him. "Unlike the pagan cosmologies, Genesis exhibits no interest in the question of God's origins. His existence prior to the world is taken as axiomatic and does not require assertion, let alone proof...God's nature finds expression...through His acts and through the demands He makes on human beings" (Sarna, *Genesis*, 5)

"From the outset, Genesis confronts us with the **Living God**, unmistakably personal". (Kidner, *Genesis*, 32) And as the personal, living God, He **speaks** creation into existence. This aspect of God's word is **declared** in "And God said". "These eight specific commands, calling all things into being...and the absence of any intermediary implies an extremely rich content for the word 'said'.... The Creator...in willing an end willed every smallest means to it. His thought shaping itself exactly to the least cell and atom, and His creative word wholly meaningful." (Kidner, 46) Thus, the Divine Author in speaking was **aware** of all that would be

involved in His plan which man would only discover as they became aware of what was in the end of creation.

In addition, His personal Word also was **aware** of what His demands on Adam needed to be, saying "Of every tree of the garden you may freely eat; but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day you eat of it you shall surely die" (2:16b,17) Before this, He said, "Let Us make man in Our image,...let them have dominion...over all the earth" (1:26) So Adam was responsible to **mediate God's rule** in obedience.

(2). The History of the heavens and earth **2:4-4:26**

While God created a good earth (1:31), next Moses introduced the history of the heaven and earth. (2:4) But it was now evident that He permitted evil. On the earth, He had created Adam (2:7) and Eve (2:21-25). God's enemy appeared to speak through the serpent. This animal was more cunning than any beast. (3:1) The serpent questioned God's Word (3:1b) and then denied His Word which threatened death (3:4,5). He tempted Eve with an explanation that God spoke out of fear, that if they ate, they would become like God knowing good and evil. When she ate, she gave some to Adam, and he ate.(3:6) Sin entered the world and they died, They were naked and powerless to do anything about evil.

God pronouncement of judgment of sin followed. The serpent- animal was cursed to crawl, and the serpent-enemy, was judged putting enmity between Eve and the serpent. That enmity would continue for an unspecified time in two lines of offspring, one from Eve and one from the serpent in fallen humans. And for the final stage, the enemy would return to do conflict with Eve's Offspring. This judgment implied a **Promise of a Line of Seed** to Eve in which the conflict would be resolved. That resolution included the conflict between the serpent who would strike the **Seed's** heel. (3: 15d). As a result, though a human **Seed**, He was not under the curse of death. And that **Seed** would eventually strike the serpent's head (3:15c) Thus we capitalize **Seed** to indicate the mystery of this divine promise.

When Adam saw that the curse of death was not an immediate physical death, since Eve would bear children, he believed what God **promised**, and in particular, the final victorious **Seed** and named her, "mother of **all living**". (3:20) Then for Adam and his wife, the LORD God gave each a tunic of skin to cover them before Him. (3:21) As a result, when Abel would offer a sacrifice from the flock and its' fat, the LORD respected his offering. (4:4) Cain's offering wasn't respected in his disregard of God's curse on the earth from which the offering had come. And he killed Abel.

Then Cain raised his family, but the family formed a culture without including God. That culture had the promise of good in the arts but also the fear of evil shown by Lamech.

While Abel had been killed, the Lord remembered His **promise**, and Eve gave birth to Seth, and Seth to Enosh (4:25-27) This introduced the line of **elect seed** and "they began to call on the name of the LORD".

(3). The Genealogy of Adam and of Shem

The line of Eve was initially enumerated in Adam's genealogy. (5:1-32) At the climax, Noah found grace in the eyes of the LORD. Through Noah's son Shem God continued the elect line. (11:10-26)

At the climax, Terah's line (11:17-32) was introduced. Abram was the elect son and called to **be a steward of His promise to be a great nation**. (12:1b-3a) And through the **promise** God began to **manage** his life as he traveled to the **promised land** which would support **the nation**. (12:4-25:11). This began the **Dispensation of Promise** where Abraham was the steward of the promise and God was the ruler of Abraham, Issac (26:2-5) and Jacob (27:27-29,28:13-16). This does not mean that Abraham mediated God's rule in the promised land, but in Abraham's life, he walked by faith offering sacrifices in the land.

While God in **promise** managed the patriarchs, the second aspect of what was promised was the **promise of the Seed in whom all nations would be blessed (12:3b)** This aspect of promise was ambiguous as stated, "in you, all nations of the earth will be blessed". The question is, in whom will blessing come to all nations? Is it Abram? or is it the nation of Israel? While each may mediate blessings, neither mediated "to all the nations of the earth". The New Testament will reveal that to be "in Jesus Christ", the ultimate **Seed** of Abraham. (Matthew 1:1,2) The identity of the **divine- human Seed** is made clear in the Son of God. While the **Seed** in Genesis overcame death in their mutual conflict, yet the mystery of His deity was also evident in the scope of blessing promised to all nations.

That role of the **promised Seed** in Abram's day was the **promised Heir**, through whom he was declared righteous. (Gen. 15:1-6) His presence in the Promise would remain the object of faith in whom was justification to be found (Rom. 4:1-4), even after **law** was added. **Then Law** became the means of God's management of Israel in the Laws' revelation. (Ex. 20:1-24:3).

Paul discussed the presence of promise after the law was added to it; Gal. 3:19, "the law was added because of transgressions, till the **Seed** should come to whom the **promise** was made"... and Gal.3:10,11,"For as many as are under the works of the law are under the curse,...but that no one is justified by the law in the sight of God is evident, for 'the just shall live by faith'". (Hab. 2:4 and Rom. 4:4,5)

(4). Judgment of the fallen descendants and Human Government

The expansion of the fallen descendants of Cain and the intrusion of "the sons of God" to pervert the human race, was the occasion for a worldwide flood. Only Noah and his family would survive in the ark they built. As Adam's descendants populated the earth until the flood, so now Noah's descendants would populate the earth that survived the flood. (9:1) But Adam's mediation of God's rule had been lost, and **Human Government** was revealed based on the role of Capital Punishment. The state as nations were now to protect human life, (9:5-17) as a flood would never destroy the race again.

(5). Judgment of the builders of a Tower at Babel in the Multiplication of Languages

The temptation to unify as a people, in order to build a city and a tower to confront the LORD was also met by judgment, by the **multiplying of languages**. So, the people were

dispersed by having distinct language and culture in each nation. This forced the peoples to spread around the earth. In addition, the multiplication of languages complicated human communication with God. Yet such communication remained possible in the languages of Hebrew, Aramaic and translations of the Bible that followed.

Concluding Points of Discussion

To prompt a discussion, I propose three issues to discuss:

First, as theologians, we must accept His use of verbal meaning as the Author's/author's willed type meaning.

This is the normative principle of what meaning is expressed in the text.

Second, as J. A. Ernesti (1707-81) posited, "the Bible must be interpreted by the same methods as those used for all other books". Those methods then involved;

"one must discern the meaning of each word had at the time of the text's writing, one must discern the style and literary genre of each writing, and words must be understood both in their immediate context (exegesis) and in their larger context" (exposition). (p18). Hauser and Watson, *Introduction and Overview, in The Enlightenment through the Nineteenth Century, Vol. 3, Eerdmans, 2017*) The two understandings are an identical type meaning.

This is the method of reading that we previously described as a hermeneutical circle.

Third, because the task of understanding a text must be approached as objective, we can compare and validate disparate understandings. As we have proposed, Gen. 1-11 can't be both Three Introductory Dispensations and a Literary Setting of Genesis which defines the theological space in which history would unfold. One is right and the other is wrong, or both are wrong. Which alternative is correct?