

7th Council on Dispensational Hermeneutics
How “Literal” Should Interpretation Be?
A Critique of the Analogical Hermeneutic

In the future, there will be a millennial reign of Jesus Christ on earth. Dispensationalists know this because they read it in the Bible. Taken a face value, passages from both testaments can mean nothing else. Ultimately, this simple statement of Scripture is the only justifiable reason for being a premillennialist. Nevertheless, when confronting a text whose literal sense creates some apparent theological or practical impossibility, some interpreters feel that they have to fudge and redefine the term “literal” to get around it. The question is whether such redefinition is necessary or desirable. To find out, this study considers whether a redefined, “less literal” hermeneutic is necessary in order to explain the presence of animal sacrifices in the millennial temple (Ezekiel 43–46).

Feinberg considers Ezekiel 40–48 is “a kind of continental divide in the area of biblical interpretation.”¹ Taken at face value, it describes a future temple in Jerusalem that is too large to fit on the temple mount. Even more disturbing, it clearly describes, indeed, it prescribes, the animal sacrifices to be offered in that temple. Hebrews 10:18, however, just as clearly teaches that since the sacrifice of Christ, “*there is no longer an offering for sin.*”² How can both statements be taken literally?³

¹Charles L. Feinberg, *The Prophecy of Ezekiel: The Glory of God*, reprint ed. (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2003), 233.

²Unless otherwise noted, all scriptural quotations are from *The New King James Version* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1982).

³It is no wonder that Hullinger calls Ezekiel 40–48 “one of the most difficult passages to harmonize with dispensational literalism.” See Jerry M. Hullinger, “The Problem of Animal Sacrifices in Ezekiel 40–48,” *Bibliotheca Sacra*

Most non-dispensationalists agree with Allis that “a thoroughly literal interpretation of Scripture is impossible”⁴ and sidestep this dilemma entirely by approaching Ezekiel 40–48 with a special, “spiritual” hermeneutic. Not surprisingly, without the objective control provided by the literal approach, they have come up with a wide variety of interpretations.⁵ One explanation is that Ezekiel 40–42 describes a historical temple in Jerusalem. Some who hold this view believe he is referring to Solomon's temple, which Nebuchadnezzar had only recently razed to the ground.⁶ Others argue that Ezekiel is anticipating the replacement temple that the returning remnant would build in the future.⁷ Either way, the temple comes before Christ, so there is no problem. Another explanation is that the text prescribes plans for the restored temple and its worship, but because the returning remnant persisted in unbelief and disobedience, they did not implement them.⁸ A third proposal

152 (1995): 279. George Zeller uses the interpretation of Ezekiel 40–48 as his fifth test of one’s commitment to literal interpretation. See “Do I Interpret the Bible Literally? Seven Tests to See If I Truly Do.” *Conservative Theological Journal* 8, no. 23 (2004): 58-59.

⁴Oswald T. Allis, *Prophecy and the Church: An Examination of the Claim of Dispensationalists That the Christian Church Is a Mystery Parenthesis Which Interrupts the Fulfilment to Israel of the Kingdom Prophecies of the Old Testament* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1945), 17.

⁵Arnold Fruchtenbaum, “The Millennial Temple—Literal or Allegorical; Part One,” *Ariel Ministries* (Spring-Summer 2012): 22-23 lists eight distinct interpretations. This study mentions only the four most common.

⁶G. A. Cooke, *Ezekiel*, International Critical Commentary (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 2000), 425; Walther Zimmerli, *Ezekiel II: A Commentary on the Book of the Prophet Ezekiel Chapters 25- 48*, Hermeneia: A Critical and Historical Commentary on the Bible (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983), 412. For a critique of this view see footnote 7.

⁷Gary DeMar, *Last Days Madness: Obsession of the Modern Church*, 4th rev. ed. (Atlanta: American Vision, 1999), 97. Whichever temple is in view, those who adopt this approach face the same difficulty: the details of Ezekiel’s description are radically different from those given elsewhere. The dimension and design of the temple are different. The sacrificial system is different. Even the geography of the land is different. See Ralph A. Alexander, “Ezekiel,” in *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary, Vol. 6: Isaiah, Jeremiah, Lamentations, Ezekiel*, edited by Frank E. Gaebelin (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1986), p. 943. See also Hobart E. Freeman, *An Introduction to the Old Testament Prophets* (Chicago: Moody, 1968), 312.

⁸F. F. Bruce, “A Reappraisal of Jewish Apocalyptic Literature,” *Review and Expositor* 72 (1975): 305; R. E. Clements, *God and Temple—the Idea of the Divine Presence in Ancient Israel* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1965), 106; Moshe

holds that Ezekiel is describing the redeemed of all ages worshiping God in heaven forever.⁹ A fourth explanation is that it is being fulfilled right now and that the temple and its rituals are “symbolic of future blessing for the church in the age of the gospel.”¹⁰ This is the view of the church fathers and the reformers and is the one most commonly accepted by contemporary amillennialists.

Of course, none of this surprising. Non-dispensationalists consistently reject the literal interpretation of any passage that ascribes to Israel a continuing role in God’s plan. When it comes to Ezekiel 40–48, however, they have an even more telling argument: taking the text literally seems impossible. The text repeatedly refers to, and even commands, burnt offerings, peace offerings, grain offerings, sin offerings (40:38–43 ; 42:13 ; 43:18–27 ; 45:15–25 ; 46:2–15 ; 46:20–24). This

Greenberg, “The Design and Themes of Ezekiel’s Program of Restoration,” *Interpretation* 38.2 (1984): 182. Despite the prestige of its defenders, this approach faces insurmountable problems. First, neither Ezra nor the post-exilic prophets condemn Israel for failing to fulfill Ezekiel’s vision. Indeed, they seem totally unaware that they were supposed to follow his plan. Second, Ezekiel’s vision requires changes that Zerubbabel’s generation were incapable of effecting. The king of Persia would not have allowed the redistribution of his land as mandated in Ezekiel 47:13-23. Even if he did, the remnant could not have made healing waters flow from the Temple to the Dead Sea and turn it into a fresh water lake (Ezekiel 47:1-12)!

⁹Tremper Longman III, “What I Mean by Historical-Grammatical Exegesis: Why I Am Not a Literalist.” *Grace Theological Journal* 11.2 (1990): 150-1. This approach fails to answer several difficult questions: Why does the prophet fill his description with so many earthly details? Why are years of Jubilee celebrated in eternity (Ezekiel 46:16-18)? How can priests marry (Ezekiel 44:22) and the prince produce descendants (46:16-17) when people do not marry in heaven (Matthew 22:30)? How can priests in heaven defile themselves by touching a dead body (Ezekiel 44:25)? Is there death in heaven?

¹⁰Feinberg, *Ezekiel*, 237. For a defense fo this position, see Daniel I. Block, *The Book of Ezekiel, Chapters 25–48*, New International Commentary of the Old Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 504-6. This approach has two fatal flaws. First, it is too subjective. Without contextual support, how can proponents show that the correlations they propose are the correct ones? Second, it is anachronistic. Ezekiel addresses his prophecy to Israelites early in the Babylonian captivity, centuries before the time of Christ. What possible sense or benefit could his original audience derive from a book that said nothing to them? See Feinberg, *Ezekiel*, 236. Both of the last two explanations also face a contextual problem: “Ezekiel employs a formula to inform his readers when he is speaking non-literally. He explains that a particular item is symbolic and then interprets the symbols for the reader. . . No such formula is employed in Ezekiel 40–48” (Andy Woods, “Enthroning the Interpreter: Dangerous Trends in Law and Theology, Part III,” *Conservative Theological Journal* 8 [2004]: 354).

apparent “retrogression”¹¹ is so troubling that even committed premillennialists find it difficult to explain without abandoning the literal hermeneutic altogether. When faced with this passage, Fausset opted to redefine what it meant to be “literal”:

The ideal temple exhibits . . . *the essential character* of the worship of Messiah as it shall be when He shall exercise sway in Jerusalem among His own people, the Jews, and thence to the ends of the earth. The very fact that the whole is a “vision” (v. 2), not an oral face to face communication, such as that granted to Moses (Num. xii.6-8), implies that the directions are not to be understood so precisely literal as those given to the Jewish lawgiver. The description involves things which, taken literally, almost involve natural impossibilities.¹²

In other words, the passage in general should be understood literally, but not all of its details. And Fausset is not the last interpreter to attempt this compromise when approaching Ezekiel 40–48.

More recently, Mickelsen has codified the semi-literal approach into a system. According to this system, the interpreter’s basic task is to “find out the meaning of a statement (command, question) for the author and for the first hearers or readers.”¹³ When doing that, however, he must recognize that the prophet “speaks to his people in their language, in their thought patterns. He makes use of the customs which they know.”¹⁴ Consequently, his statements may not be literally accurate. When he predicts chariots and swords, the fulfillment may involve tanks and rifles—or whatever weaponry is in vogue at the time of the fulfillment. When he calls down judgment on Egypt, Edom, and Babylon (the enemies of his own day), the wrath may actually fall on other nations

¹¹Robert B. Chisholm, *Handbook on the Prophets* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2002), 286.

¹²A. R. Fausset, “The Book of the Prophet Ezekiel,” in *A Commentary Critical, Experimental and Practical on the Old and New Testaments*, ed., Robert Jamieson, A. R. Fausset and David Brown (1864-70; reprint ed., Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1945), 4:356 [italics in original]. See also H. A. Ironside, *Expository Notes on Ezekiel the Prophet* (Neptune, NJ: Loizeaux Brothers, 1949), 305.

¹³A. Berkeley Mickelsen, *Interpreting the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1963), 5.

¹⁴*Ibid.*, 295.

(the enemies in some future day). Therefore, the interpreter must distinguish what is actually predicted from what is actually said. To do this, he needs to apply an analogical hermeneutic.¹⁵

Mickelsen illustrates this approach by applying it to the renewed temple, priesthood, and sacrificial system predicted in Ezekiel 40–48. As Mickelsen sees it, the interpreter begins by preserving a literal base; that is, he recognizes the objective facts that establish the meaning, “(worship = worship; Palestine = Palestine), while at the same time he makes use of *the principle of correspondence and analogy* (People of God = Jew and Gentile in Christ).”¹⁶ The interpreter then uses this data to identify the time-frame of the prophecy, which in this case, according to Mickelsen, is “before the return of the King and during his eternal reign.” Of course, the forms of worship in that day cannot include actual sacrifices; the book of Hebrews precludes that. Nevertheless, “they will have this in common with the ancient ritual—that of bringing an active response on the part of men as they enter into a vital, outward fellowship with God.”¹⁷

Essentially, Mickelsen’s system involves the “updating” of Ezekiel’s meaning in light of the cross and the birth of the church. When Ezekiel wrote, the people of God included only the Jews, but now that Christ has come, it also includes Gentiles. Thus, when Ezekiel speaks of God residing in the midst of the children of Israel forever (Ezekiel 43:7-9), he is actually referring to the reign of Christ over all men in the new heavens and new earth (Revelation 21:3). When he predicts that

¹⁵Ibid., 296. Mickelsen himself calls this process “fulfillment by equivalency.”

¹⁶Ibid., 297-8 [italics in original].

¹⁷Ibid, 298.

Levitical priests will offer burnt offerings, peace offerings, and grain offerings, Ezekiel really means some undefined sort of spiritual worship that involves neither priests nor sacrifices.¹⁸

Now, Mickelsen is an amillennialist, but premillennialists have also adopted an analogical hermeneutic when approaching Ezekiel 40–48. This approach has become more common in recent years, but it is not really new. As previously shown, Fausset uses a version of this approach. More startling, Ironside also tries to escape the problem of animal sacrifices after the cross by appealing to the cultural context: “Prior to the work of the cross there could be no other way of presenting that work prophetically than by directing attention to such offerings as the people understood.”¹⁹ In his *Handbook on the Prophets*, Chisholm takes the analogical approach even further:

Ezekiel’s vision is contextualized for his sixth-century B.C. audience. He describes the reconciliation of God and his people in terms that would be meaningful to his audience. . . . Since the fulfillment of the vision transcends these culturally conditioned boundaries, we should probably view it as idealized to some extent and look for an essential, rather than an exact fulfillment of many of its features.²⁰

Applying his concept of “essential fulfillment” to Ezekiel, Chisholm attempts to preserve the basic content of the prophecy without contradicting the teaching of Hebrews 10:18. To do so, however, he has to “update” the meaning of Ezekiel’s words in three places. The first occurs in Ezekiel 37:15-28, where the Lord promises to bring the scattered tribes of both Israel and Judah back to the land and make them one nation again. Chisholm, however, concludes that since “the northern tribes never returned to the land and disappeared as they were assimilated into the surrounding

¹⁸“At his second coming Christ will legislate just how this can best be done” (Ibid.).

¹⁹Ironside, *Ezekiel*, 305. See also George N. Peters, *The Theocratic Kingdom*, reprint ed. (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1952), 3:83-91 and J. Sidlow Baxter, *Explore the Book* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1960), 4:32.

²⁰Chisholm, *Prophets*, 285.

culture,” this national restoration must be fulfilled “through the Jewish people, who are descended from Judah, Benjamin, and Levi,” and not all twelve tribes.²¹

Chisholm’s second update is in Ezekiel 43–46, and concerns the renewal of temple worship in the Millennium. Because Ezekiel describes it in such detail, Chisholm accepts the temple as a literal future reality, but not the sacrifices Ezekiel prescribes for it. Such sacrifices would be a “serious retrogression” in light of the sacrificial work of Christ. Therefore, the predicted sacrifices will be “essentially fulfilled when the Israel of the future celebrates the redemptive work of their savior in their new temple.”²² Rooker, a scholar that Chisholm specifically cites, considers this conclusion self-evident, asking, “How else could worship have been described?”²³

The third update of Ezekiel occurs in chapters 45 and 46 and concerns the “prince.” As described by Ezekiel, this prince creates several problems for Chisholm. The prince offers sacrifices for himself and the people: sin offerings (45:22) as well as burnt offerings and peace offerings (46:12). He has physical offspring (45:8; 46:16-17). Perhaps, the most troubling thing about him is that Ezekiel 46:18 warns him not to oppress the people. The difficulty is that Chisholm identifies the prince as the Messiah, the resurrected Jesus; therefore, even though the original readers would have

²¹Ibid., 286. Presumably, Chisholm explains the apparent contradiction by an appeal to the conditional character of predictive prophecy, a position he defended at the 2003 Annual Evangelical Theological Society meeting in Atlanta. For an amplified and revised version of his paper, see Robert Chisholm, “When Prophecy Appears to Fail, Check Your Hermeneutic,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 53 (2010): 561-77. Chisholm’s explanation, however, has a ripple effect on the interpretation of other prophecies. For example, if he is correct, then to whom does Rev. 7:1-8 refer when it speaks of the sealing of one hundred and forty-four thousand “servants of our God,” twelve thousand from each of the tribes of Israel?

²²Ibid.

²³Mark F. Rooker, “Evidence From Ezekiel,” in *A Case for Premillennialism*, edited by D. K. Campbell and J. L. Townsend (Chicago: Moody, 1992), 133.

taken them at face value, the details of this prophecy cannot be fulfilled as stated: “Ezekiel’s audience would have found this portrayal quite natural. However, Jesus, the one who fulfills the vision, will have no need to offer such sacrifices, nor will he institute a dynasty. On the contrary, he will reign over his kingdom forever.”²⁴

To many, the analogical approach may seem the perfect compromise, combining the strengths of the other approaches and minimizing their weaknesses. Where spiritual interpretation lacks objective controls,²⁵ the analogical approach provides a measure of stability: worship is worship; Palestine is Palestine. Where literal interpretation generates theological problems, the analogical approach numbly sidesteps them: Israel is Israel, just not all the tribes; sacrificial worship is worship, but without actual sacrifices. Of course, compromise comes at a cost. The interpreter has to adjust or overlook what Ezekiel actually says, but according to Rooker, this cost is minimal since “this view gives progressive revelation its full due.”²⁶

A more careful evaluation, however, reveals that the compromise is far from perfect, and the cost is exorbitant. Analogical interpretation does not escape the weaknesses of the other positions; it combines them. While not as subjective as spiritual interpretation, the analogical

²⁴Chisholm, *Prophets*, 286. The prince is only a problem to those who, like Chisholm, insist that the prince must be Jesus. He is never explicitly identified as such, and almost everything said about him runs counter to the nature and work of the resurrected Savior. Consequently, he almost certainly not the Messiah, but a mortal descendent of David’s line, who is granted special honor and responsibility. Understood in this way, the prince is not a problem and provides no excuse to abandon or adjust the literal hermeneutic.

²⁵Alexander argues that “the figurative or ‘spiritualizing’ interpretive approach does not seem to solve any of the problems of Ezekiel 40–48; it tends to create new ones.” This is because “the interpretations become subjective” (Alexander, “Ezekiel,” 943). See also J. D. Levenson, *The Theology of the Program of Restoration of Ezekiel 40–48* (Missoula, MT: Scholars Press, 1976), 45; Charles H. Dyer, “Biblical Meaning of ‘Fulfillment,’” in *Issues in Dispensationalism*, edited by Wesley R. Willis and John R. Master (Chicago: Moody, 1994), 57-72.

²⁶Rooker, “Evidence,” 134-135.

approach is far from objective. It is the interpreter, not the text that defines the literal core. When establishing their core, Mickelsen and Chisholm both reject the simple identification of Israel as Israel, but in very different ways. For Mickelsen, the covenant amillennialist, Israel is more than national Israel; it is the church, composed of both Jews and Gentiles. For Chisholm, the dispensational premillennialist, Israel is less than Israel, just the descendants of three tribes: Judah, Benjamin, and Levi. Mickelsen, the covenant amillennialist, locates the fulfillment at the very end of time and into eternity. Chisholm locates it during an earthly millennium. How objective can the literal core be when the theological assumptions of the interpreter redefine it so easily? How can anyone know which, if either, literal core is correct? Of course, the traditional premillennialist also risks reading his assumptions into his interpretation. But unlike Mickelsen and Chisholm, he has an objective control. For him, the text is not so malleable. His strict hermeneutic requires him to take Ezekiel (not to mention God) at his word.

Another problem with the analogical approach is the license it apparently grants interpreters to rewrite Scripture,²⁷ actually making it less clear. When Ezekiel says that the prince will prepare “the sin offering, the grain offering, the burnt offering, and the peace offerings to make atonement” (Ezekiel 45:17), his language is clear and concrete. The analogical interpretations, however, are inevitably vague and fuzzy. When Mickelsen explains Ezekiel’s sacrifices, he leaves the reader dangling. Just what is involved in “an active response on the part of men as they enter into a vital, outward fellowship with God”²⁸? Chisholm does not do much better. What will the Israel of the

²⁷J. Dwight Pentecost. *Things to Come* (Grand Rapids: Dunham, 1958), 6 warns of this very danger, that without a consistent literal hermeneutic, the meaning of Scripture will become whatever seems reasonable to the interpreter.

²⁸Mickelsen, *Interpreting*, 298.

future be doing when it “celebrates the redemptive work of their savior in their new temple”²⁹? Rooker does much worse when he understands “Ezekiel to be generally speaking of a future worship practice in the millennial age.”³⁰ If these examples are representative, under the analogical approach, the interpreter’s task may be summarized as blurring the focus.

Rooker justifies this sort of rewriting as a manifestation of “progressive revelation,” but Rooker’s understanding of this term differs noticeably from that held by most inerrantists. For inerrantists, progressive revelation refers to God’s gradual clarification of his will and plan over time. For example, consider the progressive revelation of the promised deliverer. First, he is presented as the seed of the woman (Genesis 3:15), then more specifically, as the seed of Abraham (Genesis 12:2-30), as the seed of David (2 Samuel 7:16), and ultimately, as the seed of Mary (Luke 2:26-38). Each stage makes the identification *more clear and specific*. Each stage *adds* information. For Rooker, it is very different, at least when it comes to Ezekiel 40–48. After the cross, the prophet’s message actually becomes *less specific and less clear*. Later revelation actually reduces the amount of information and thus changes the message.

When Ezekiel predicted specific animal sacrifices, the assumption is that he meant what he said. Chisholm, however, argues that Ezekiel meant something different, but had to express his message within the limitations of his audience: “Ezekiel’s audience would have found it impossible to conceive of a restored covenant community apart from the sacrificial system.”³¹ There are at least two flaws in this argument. First, such an adaptation was not necessary. Worship apart from animal

²⁹Chisholm, *Prophets*, 286.

³⁰Rooker, *Evidence*, 134.

³¹Chisholm, *Prophets*, 286.

sacrifice was not inconceivable for the Jews in captivity. Indeed, it was to be norm for more than two generations. Furthermore, the Hebrew language has a rich vocabulary of worship. Had Ezekiel used one of the many, more general terms for worship, the exilic community would not have been offended or confused by it. His failure to do so raises a crucial question: why did Ezekiel—why did the Holy Spirit—use language whose effect is to mislead the reader? Until its proponents answer this question, the validity of the analogical approach remains highly questionable.

There is another flaw in Chisholm's argument. If Ezekiel adapted his description to his audience, his adaptation is inadequate. The sacrificial system he describes differs significantly from the one with which his readers were familiar.³² In his temple vision, there is no reference to a high priest, no evening sacrifice, no Pentecost, no Feast of Trumpets, and no Day of Atonement. Alexander notes that the changes are apparently necessitated by the cross: "The millennial worship system is distinctively different from the Mosaic system only in that certain Mosaic elements are omitted or modified, most likely because of Christ's finished work on the cross."³³ This fact, however, does not save Chisholm's argument. Ezekiel's adaptation is still inadequate. On the one hand, if his audience needed the sacrificial system to understand the restoration of the covenant

³²According to Fisch, ancient Rabbis were troubled by how different the ceremonial system in Ezekiel was from that in the Law: "The text of the concluding chapters, dealing with the Temple of the future presents almost insurmountable difficulties. the type and number of sacrifices prescribed there differ from those mentioned in the Pentateuch; and there are many innovations which, according to the accepted law, are normally beyond the authority of a prophet to institute (Shab. 104a). With reference to these difficulties the Rabbis said that only Elijah, the prophet who is to herald the final redemption, will be able to explain them satisfactorily" (S. Fisch, *Ezekiel: Hebrew Text & English translation with and Introduction and Commentary*, Soncino Books of the Bible [London and Bournemouth: Soncino, 1950], xi). To demonstrate that Ezekiel was written before "P," Berry gives an elaborate summary of the differences between the Levitical system and that in Ezekiel (George R. Berry, "The Authorship of Ezekiel 40–48." *Journal of Biblical Literature* 34 [1915]: 17-40).

³³Alexander, "Ezekiel," 949.

community, why did Ezekiel introduce these differences? On the other hand, if Ezekiel can eliminate the high priest and the Day of Atonement without confusing his audience, why not eliminate animal sacrifices altogether?

Obviously, the analogical approach has some serious problems³⁴, but isn't the alternative untenable? No. Contrary to the contentions of Mickelsen, Chisholm, Rooker, and others, one does not have to adopt any alternative hermeneutic to confront the problems in Ezekiel 40–48. Premillennialists have been doing so for generations, as Walvoord noted more than fifty years ago: “The most thoroughgoing students of premillennialism who evince understanding of the relation of literal interpretation to premillennial doctrine usually embrace the concept of a literal temple and literal sacrifices.”³⁵ They can still do so because the literal approach provides potential explanations at least as adequate as those offered by the analogical, but without its difficulties.

The earliest, and still the most common, premillennial explanation of Ezekiel 40–48 is that proposed by A. C. Gaebelein in 1918: “While the sacrifices Israel brought once had a prospective meaning, the sacrifices brought in the millennial Temple have a retrospective meaning.”³⁶ According to this explanation, animal sacrifices in the millennium will have roughly the same function as the Lord's Table does now: to remind Millennial believers of Christ's sacrifice for them. Beware

³⁴The adoption of an analogical hermeneutic may very well be fatal to dispensational eschatology. At the very least, it would seriously cripple it: As one prominent amillennialist observes, if premillennialists must abandon, or even modify, their literal hermeneutic to cope with difficult passages, “a crucial foundation stone for the entire dispensational system has . . . been set aside!” (Anthony A. Hoekema, *The Bible and the Future* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979], 204).

³⁵John F. Walvoord, *The Millennial Kingdom* (Findlay, OH: Dunham, 1959), 311.

³⁶Arno Clemens Gaebelein, *The Prophet Ezekiel: An Analytical Exposition* (New York: Our Hope, 1918), 312. Other notable proponents of this view are Erich Sauer (*From Eternity to Eternity*, trans. G. H. Lang [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1954], 179-84), Pentecost (*Things to Come*, 525-7), and Feinberg (*Ezekiel*, 263).

explains that this reminder is necessary because the Millennium represents “an age that is so free from the external effects of sin that its exceeding sinfulness is not clearly understood.”³⁷

While still popular, this explanation has at least one serious drawback, and it comes from the text itself. According to Ezekiel, the purpose of these sacrifices is to “make atonement” (כִּפֶּר, *kipper*—43:20, 26; 45:15, 17, 20), not to “bring remembrance” (הִזְכִּיר, *hizkîr*). Furthermore, Ezekiel 43:27 makes it clear that the animal sacrifices do more than memorialize. They perform a vital function in the kingdom in that they allow the Lord Yahweh to “accept” (רָצָה, *rāṣāh*) people. This perfectly parallels the function of sacrifices in Leviticus, where the verb כִּפֶּר occurs 49 times, ten of them followed by “and he will be forgiven” (Leviticus 4:20, 20, 26, 31; 5:10, 13, 16, 18; 6:7 [Heb. 5:26]; 19:22).³⁸ Confronted with this evidence, several dispensational premillennialists have offered other explanations, explanations that address the difficulties associated with the memorial view without abandoning a strictly literal hermeneutic.

Central to these explanations is the role of animal sacrifice in the Levitical system and its relationship to that in Ezekiel 40–48.³⁹ The New Testament makes it clear that neither Levitical nor Millennial sacrifices can take away sin (Hebrews 7:19; 9:9; 10:1, 4, 11, 18). This fact, however, does not necessarily mean that their function must be limited to foreshadowing the sacrifice of Christ.

³⁷Paul N. Benware, *Understanding End Times Prophecy* (Chicago: Moody, 1995), 283.

³⁸(Leviticus 4:20, 20, 26, 31; 5:10, 13, 16, 18; 6:7 [Heb. 5:26]; 19:22)

³⁹“The key to the entire problem may be found in answers to three questions. (1) What was the true function of animal sacrifices in the Old Covenant? (2) What is the significance of the fundamental differences between Ezekiel’s picture of the New Covenant system of worship and the Old Covenant system of worship? (3) Would a worship system involving animal sacrifices necessarily represent a great step backward for New Covenant Israel during the Kingdom Age?” (John C. Whitcomb, “Christ’s Atonement and Animal Sacrifices in Israel,” Pre-Trib Research Center, accessed July 29, 2014, <http://www.pre-trib.org/data/pdf/Whitcomb-Ezekiel40thru48andMi.pdf>, 9. This is a revision of an article with the same name in *Grace Theological Journal* 6 [1985]: 201-17).

According to both the Old and New Testaments, these sacrifices *did* something. Leviticus states that they “made atonement” and so brought God’s forgiveness.⁴⁰ Hebrews 9:13 agrees: “The blood of bulls and goats and the ashes of a heifer, sprinkling the unclean, sanctifies for the purifying of the flesh.”⁴¹ In short, something genuinely changed when a man brought a sacrifice, but that change was temporal, not eternal. In the words of Whitcomb, “what happened was *temporal, finite, external, and legal*—not *eternal, infinite, internal, and soteriological*. Nevertheless, what happened was personally and immediately significant, not simply symbolic and/or prophetic.”⁴²

Ryrie explains the temporal, finite, external, and legal effect of animal sacrifice as a function of theocracy: “In a theocracy, every sin had a Godward facet as well as a governmental one.”⁴³ To understand this duality, consider the status of a thief in ancient Israel. On the one hand, he is guilty of a crime, but once he pays his “debt to society,” he is no longer considered guilty. Thus, when God is the government, as in the Levitical system, “sacrifices when properly brought automatically made the person right with the law.”⁴⁴ On the other hand, the thief is also guilty of a sin, and the wages of sin is eternal death (Romans 3:23). The guilt for sin can be expunged only by the redemptive work of the coming Messiah. Animal sacrifices were of no benefit. This is the very

⁴⁰See above, page 12.

⁴¹In Hebrews 9:13, this statement is part of a Greek first class condition, which according to the context is assumed to be true: If the blood of bulls and goats did cleanse the flesh, how much more will the blood of Christ cleanse the conscience! See F. F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964), 201-4.

⁴²Whitcomb, “Animal Sacrifices,” 9 [italics in original].

⁴³Charles C. Ryrie, “Why Sacrifices in the Millennium?” *Emmaus Journal* 11 (2002): 304.

⁴⁴*Ibid.*, 305. See also Freeman, *Introduction*, 318-20; Paul Lee Tan, *The Interpretation of Prophecy* (Winona Lake, IN: BMH Books, 1974), 296-98.

point that the author of Hebrews is making. In the Levitical system, animal sacrifices were of temporal benefit, but they could never provide eternal salvation. They had to be offered again and again (Hebrews 10:1-4).

This temporal function in the Levitical system leads Whitcomb to suggest a similar function for animal sacrifices in the Millennium: “Future animal sacrifices will be ‘efficacious’ and ‘expiatory’ only in terms of the strict provision for ceremonial (and thus temporal) forgiveness within the theocracy of Israel.”⁴⁵ The many significant differences between the Levitical and the Millennial systems⁴⁶ make it improper to call Millennial sacrifices a “restoration” or a “retrogression.”⁴⁷ They involve much more than a simple reversion to Old Testament practice. They constitute a genuine advance over the worship found in previous dispensations. Unlike those in ancient Israel, millennial worshipers will understand their ritual in the clear context of the cross. Unlike the church, they will also understand it in the unimaginable context of the reigning Savior. As Whitcomb notes,

The concept of progressive revelation guarantees that the New Covenant theocracy will begin with more knowledge than the Church did at Pentecost. Yet this theocracy will retain its distinctive Israelite characteristics—a promised land, a temple, appropriate animal sacrifices, and an earthly Zadokian priesthood (in that day visibly subordinate to Jesus Christ the Melchizedekian High Priest).⁴⁸

⁴⁵Whitcomb, “Animal Sacrifices,” 11.

⁴⁶See above, pages 10-11. Pay special attention to the content of footnote 31.

⁴⁷For these descriptions, see Allis, *Prophecy and the Church*, 246 and Chisholm, *Prophets*, 286. Hullinger notes that “Many people wrongly think that dispensationalists say that the entire Mosaic economy will be reinstated in the millennium. But this is not the case . . . The Mosaic Law is not to be reinstated, but only aspects of the Law that focus on the subject of god’s presence” (Jerry M. Hullinger, “The Divine Presence, Uncleanness, and Ezekiel’s Millennial Sacrifices,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 163 [2006]: 405.

⁴⁸Whitcomb, “Animal Sacrifices,” 17-8.

In short: the sacrifices will perform the same non-redemptive functions they performed in the Old Testament, but in an atmosphere where the worshiper clearly sees their significance.

Many contemporary premillennialists accept some version of this approach. There are variations, but nothing fundamentally different. Two are worthy of comment.⁴⁹ One narrows the focus of millennial sacrifices; the other broadens it. The first is the position of Jerry M. Hullinger, who wrote his Th. D. dissertation on the topic⁵⁰ and has authored several articles on the matter since.⁵¹ Hullinger agrees with Whitcomb's basic premise that "the foundation for sacrifices in Leviticus is retained" in the Millennium since God is physically resident among his people.⁵² He differs, however, in limiting the function of millennial sacrifices to the purification of the temple. The causes of defilement found in ancient Israel will still exist, meaning that "every person at one time or another in his life would be in a state of uncleanness."⁵³ Furthermore, impurity is spread by contact, meaning it will inevitably penetrate the temple. Therefore, as he sees it, "these impurities will be an issue in the millennial temple, and the issue is related to the divine presences and not to

⁴⁹Among the other premillennial explanations are Thompson's contention that during the Millennium, blood sacrifices will serve as "a constant and grim warning" of wrath to come for those that refuse to trust in Christ. (Clive A. Thompson, "The Necessity of Blood Sacrifices in Ezekiel's Temple," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 123 [1966]: 237-48) and Bolender's speculation that they will reveal God the Father in a special way (Bob Bolender, "Memorials and Shadows: Animal Sacrifices of the Millennium," *Chafer Theological Seminary Journal* 8 [2002]: 26-40).

⁵⁰Jerry M. Hullinger, "A Proposed Solution to the Problem of Animal Sacrifices in Ezekiel 40-48" (ThD diss., Dallas Theological seminary, 1993).

⁵¹Hullinger, "Problem," 279-89; "Divine Presence," 405-22; and "Two Atonement Realms: Reconciling Sacrifice in Ezekiel and Hebrews," *Journal of Dispensational Hermeneutics* 11 (2007): 33-63.

⁵²Hullinger, "Divine Presence," 405.

⁵³Hullinger, "Problem," 285.

the Mosaic Law as such. . . [Therefore,] it will be necessary to renew some type of cleansing during the kingdom period.”⁵⁴ Animal sacrifice then, as in the past, will perform this function. Still, though Hullinger’s argument is impressive, Ryrie notes that not all the evidence in Ezekiel supports his explanation as thoroughly as Hullinger believes.⁵⁵

The second variant position is that of Charles Ryrie. Ryrie also accepts Whitcomb’s perspective in its entirety, but he broadens it. Arguing from the theological functions of the Mosaic law as a whole, he posits two further functions of Millennial sacrifices, a soteriological one and a devotional one. Soteriologically, millennial sacrifices will perform the same function as the Levitical did. That is, they will point to Christ, reminding “unbelievers of their need to deal with the eternal consequences of sin and point them to the One who paid for those sins and who is there present offering that salvation to them.”⁵⁶ This function is essentially identical to the memorial view.⁵⁷ Devotionally, as in the Levitical system, the Millennial sacrifices will give true believers a concrete way of expressing their devotion.⁵⁸ Isaiah 56:7 attests to this function: “Them [aliens that love the name of the LORD, v. 6] I will bring to My holy mountain, and make them joyful in My house of prayer. Their burnt offerings and their sacrifices will be accepted on My altar.” Theologically, Ryrie may well be correct about the three-fold function of Millennial sacrifice. Exegetically, however, his additional functions lack contextual support since neither has an “atoning” effect. Although

⁵⁴Ibid. 287.

⁵⁵Ryrie, “Sacrifices,” 303.

⁵⁶Ibid., 309.

⁵⁷See above, pages 12-3.

⁵⁸Ryrie, “Sacrifices,” 309.

millennial sacrifices may also serve other functions, Ezekiel focuses only on the theocratic/ceremonial one.

While this study prefers Whitcomb's explanation, it is impossible to prove that he is right. What can be proved is that the literal approach does not lead to self-contradiction. Interpreters do not have to "correct" the text of Ezekiel 40–48 to make sense of it; they do not have to resort to allegory or analogy. Even when the literal approach leaves loose ends, they do not need a new hermeneutic. They only need faith—the faith to believe that God says what he means and means what he says. The inability of the interpreter to explain everything is nothing new. As Fruchtenbaum points out, the Old Testament saint had the very same problem:

I suspect that an Old Testament saint who understood Isaiah 53 literally would have concluded that the Messiah would be the final sacrifice for sin. But how would that correlate with the Law of Moses that prohibited human sacrifices? He might not have been able to answer all the questions Isaiah 53 raised in light of the Law of Moses, but that would not have justified allegorizing the prophecies of Isaiah away.⁵⁹

Confusing or not, all the prophecies of Christ's first advent were fulfilled literally, and so will all those in Ezekiel 40–48, even the ones that scholars debate the most.

In the meantime, it is enough to recognize that problems such as those presented by Ezekiel 40–48 do not require the honest interpreter to abandon or even adjust his hermeneutic. The scholar, like the child, must submit to the limits and responsibilities of Deuteronomy 29:29: "The secret *things belong* to the LORD, but those *things which are revealed belong* to us and to our children forever, that we may do all the words of this law." May God's people—especially the scholars—focus on what is revealed, and leave the rest to him.

⁵⁹Fruchtenbaum, "Temple, Part One," 22.

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