

# “Émile Guers and Charles Ryrie: A Case Study of Continuity in the History of Dispensationalism Concerning Literal Interpretation”

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September 14, 2016

## Introduction

The Genevan Émile Guers (1794-1882) was the most interesting discovery among many research nuggets during the years of work on my Ph.D. dissertation. While studying the theological method of the early twentieth-century dispensationalist Arno C. Gaebelein, it became clear that this local church pastor from Geneva was a critical factor, although not the only stimulus, in the conversion of Gaebelein from postmillennialism to premillennialism in the late 1880s. The vehicle for the encouragement toward a premillennial understanding of eschatology was Guers' French book *La Future D'Israël* published in 1856.<sup>1</sup> What surprised me when I read the book was the similarity to Charles Ryrie's *Dispensationalism Today* of 1965 in the area of essentials as one approaches interpretation of the Bible.<sup>2</sup> This correlation between the two dispensational writings separated by 109 years has been presented earlier but here an attempt will be made to delve more deeply into Guers' understanding of literal interpretation to show a measure of continuity with the later Ryrie.<sup>3</sup> This study provides evidence prompting the consideration that harmony exists in the history of traditional dispensationalism on this most important issue of interpretive method even though a variety of theological conclusions and methodological nuances exist within the tradition.

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<sup>1</sup> Émile Guers, *Israël aux Derniers Jours De L'Économie Actuelle ou Essai Sur La Restauration Prochaine De Ce Peuple, Suivi D'Un Fragment Sur Le Millénarisme* (Genève : Emile Beroud, 1856). The short title which Gaebelein used, *La Future D'Israël*, may actually come from the German edition: *Israels Zunkunft* (Leipzig: Ernst Bredt, 1860). I am using the short title here for the German edition as well but the wording comes over into Gaebelein's French title. The remainder of this presentation will refer to the wording and pagination of the following English translation: *Israel in the Last Days of the Present Economy; or, An Essay on the Coming Restoration of This People; Also a Fragment on Millenarianism* with a preface by Aubrey C. Price (London: Wertheim, Macintosh, and Hunt, 1862). The preface declares the translator to be an unnamed woman (vii). Further references to the book will simply be *The Future of Israel* or *Future of Israel*.

<sup>2</sup> Charles C. Ryrie, *Dispensationalism Today* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1965). Later editions and updates of Ryrie's work have been published as *Dispensationalism* (Chicago, Moody Press, 1995 & 2007). For this presentation, the original work *Dispensationalism Today* will be used.

<sup>3</sup> My earlier articles dealing with Guers, one in detail and two which make brief mention, are "Literal Interpretation, Theological Method, and the Essence of Dispensationalism," *The Journal of Ministry and Theology* 1 (Spring 1997): 8-9; "Émile Guers: An Early Darbyite Response to Irvingism and a Precursor to Charles Ryrie," *The Conservative Theological Journal* 1 (April 1997): 31-46 -- this article was originally presented as a paper at the Pre-Trib Study Group in January 1997; "The Future of Dispensationalism" (Toronto: Unpublished paper presented to the Dispensational Study Group of the Evangelical Theological Society, 2002). The articles can be found at my blog site [www.our-hope.org](http://www.our-hope.org). I also have a lengthy section on Guers in my updated and published dissertation, Michael D. Stallard, *The Early Twentieth-Century Dispensationalism of Arno C. Gaebelein* (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 2002), 14-18, 61-73. After further research, I have come to believe that the term Darbyite is too strong to describe Guers as will be seen below.

Guers' name shows up on the historical landscape in Geneva in the second decade of the nineteenth century.<sup>4</sup> He was one of two students who refused in November 1816 to participate in censuring a former student of the seminary due to a scathing attack that student wrote criticizing the Established Church (Reformed), that is, the Protestant pastors in Geneva, many of whom taught in the school. Apparently, the Enlightenment and the French Revolutionary spirit had sadly dismantled to some extent the orthodoxy of John Calvin's home.<sup>5</sup> The main issue appears to be the deity of Christ. Guers stood for the orthodox view of Christ and against a form of Arianism present in Geneva among many of the Protestant leaders. Eventually, he was forced to leave the seminary and, on the outskirts of the city, helped to start a church or assembly at Bourg-de-Four.<sup>6</sup>

Two decades later John Nelson Darby came to Geneva in late 1837 and spent time teaching and assisting at Guers' church off and on for over two years.<sup>7</sup> In the author's preface to *The Future of Israel*, the writer notes that his thoughts recorded in the book had "been gradually developing since the year 1831. Six or seven years later the most striking features of the Essay now published, were completely fixed and framed in his mind."<sup>8</sup> The time frame cited by Guers shows that the finalization of his thoughts on the interpretation of biblical teaching concerning Israel came about just before and during the time Darby appears and ministers in Geneva. This is probably not a coincidence. No doubt Darby had a strengthening effect on Guers in this area.

Guers clearly demonstrates, however, that the relationship with Darby is not as a student receiving instruction from his master. The older Guers and his "brethren" church predate Darby and the Plymouth Brethren by virtually a decade. In fact, in the preface to *The Future of Israel*, Guers gives Benjamin Newton credit as the "most eminent author of this literalist school in England."<sup>9</sup> Darby is not mentioned in this regard.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> For the details about Guers and the situation in Geneva at this time in history, see Timothy C. F. Stunt, *From Awakening to Secession: Radical Evangelicals in Switzerland and Britain 1815-35* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 2000), 25-49.

<sup>5</sup> Note that it is about this same time that independence from France is regained in the aftermath of Napoleon and the Congress of Vienna (1814-15).

<sup>6</sup> Bourg-de-Four is a place now within Geneva proper. The origin of its name is unknown. The name of the church simply shows the location of the meetings. Sometimes the church was referred to as *petite église* or the "little church" which met at Bourg-de-Four (Stunt, *From Awakening to Secession*, 45).

<sup>7</sup> Stunt, *From Awakening to Secession*, 307. The visit of Darby to Geneva in 1837 and his connection to Guers and the Bourg-de-Four assembly is confirmed by Baron H. de Goltz, a contemporary critic of Darby, Irving, Guers, and the separatist movements. See Baron H. de Goltz, *Genève Religieuse au Dix-Neuvième Siècle* (Geneve: Henri George, 1862), 452.

<sup>8</sup> Guers, *Future of Israel*, iii.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, n. 1. It is literalism that is the core of Guers' view of prophecies about Israel as our discussion will show.

<sup>10</sup> Darby and Newton were to split in the 1840s over the timing of the rapture. The most complete analysis of the relationship of Darby and Newton may be found in Jonathan D. Burnham, *A Story of Conflict: The Controversial Relationship between Benjamin Wills Newton and John Nelson Darby*, Studies in Evangelical History and Thought (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2006).

Another line of evidence showing that the interpretive methodology of Guers was not simply “handed down” by Darby can be found in two letters written by the Genevan pastor published as a booklet entitled *Le Littéralisme Dans La Prophétie*.<sup>11</sup> Responding to the charge that he was a champion of the “Darbyite system,” Guers explains, “He gives me in this more honor than I merit.”<sup>12</sup> Then with exactitude, the Genevan pastor lays out the historical facts as he knows them: “Literalism, with its chief applications to prophecy, existed long before Mr. J. N. Darby, or Mr. B. W. Newton, and before me. It is also as ancient as Christianity. We have used it [literalism], each one in his manner, but we did not create it. It is the interpretation of evangelical Anglican authors who, in 1828 or 1829, directed my attention to this important subject.”<sup>13</sup> In frustrating fashion, he does not name those other Anglican authors! He goes on to say, however, that “the most salient traits of this work were formed and arrived in my mind before there was a question of Darbyism.”<sup>14</sup> Finally, citing the apostolic injunction to “examine all things and retain that which is good,” Guers’ evaluation is that “I have done this myself for the writings of the Plymouthites as for the others, and I have taken some fruit.”<sup>15</sup>

In light of this testimony from Guers (for which there is no reason to cast doubt), at best the relationship between Darby and Guers should be considered reciprocal. Darby’s presence and influence cannot be dismissed but it cannot be considered the starting fire for Guers’ thinking. Apparently, the literal interpretation of the Bible, especially in prophecy, was being discussed by all segments of radical evangelicalism in the post-war decades as Europe is being put back together. A strengthening of views, especially about Israel, is taking place due to the cross-pollinated discussions. In the end, it is safe to affirm that Guers is clearly among those in the vanguard of the rediscovery of the Jewish nature of the Bible that came to be known later as modern dispensationalism.<sup>16</sup> Moreover, it is impossible to limit literal interpretation to one small Darby stream. The post-Napoleonic environment of 1815-1840 can be characterized partly as dissident evangelical groups finding each other. Methods of Bible interpretation were clearly in the air and on all their minds. They are asking the right questions.

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<sup>11</sup> Émile Guers, *Le Littéralisme Dans La Prophétie: Lettres à M. Le Pasteur F. Bertholet-Bridel* (Geneve: Emile Beroud, 1862). Note that this publication came out the same year as the English translation of *The Future of Israel* and six years after the French edition. In part, these two letters are responses to critics of Guers’ book. English translation of portions of *Le Littéralisme Dans La Prophétie* for this presentation are this writer’s work.

<sup>12</sup> Guers, *Littéralisme*, 3.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.* The beginning of the quote comes from Guers’ own reference back to his work *The Future of Israel*. However, that work does not mention Darby. Here in *Littéralisme* he confirms that he was not force fed from Darby’s hand. This fact, however, does not rule out Darbyite influence on Guers in nuancing details. See also Michael J. Szigel, “The History of Dispensationalism” in *Dispensationalism and the History of Redemption: A Developing and Diverse Tradition*, gen. ed., D. Jeffrey Bingham and Glenn R. Kreider (Chicago: Moody, 2015), 75-76.

<sup>15</sup> Guers, *Littéralisme*, 4.

<sup>16</sup> See Mike Stallard, “The Rediscovery of the Jewish Perspective of the Bible” in *The Gathering Storm: Understanding Prophecy in Critical Times*, gen ed. Mal Couch (Springfield, MO: 21st Century Press, 2005), 57-71.

## Overview of Guers' Interpretive Method and Comparison to Ryrie

### Émile Guers

After an initial chapter in *The Future of Israel* on why Christians should be interested in Israel and Bible prophecy, the Genevan pastor turns to “General Principles Which Should Guide Us in the Study of Prophecy.”<sup>17</sup> A simple listing of these three principles is quite instructive:

1. Literalism
2. Diversity of classes and privileges in the entire body of the redeemed – Israel must not be confounded with the Church
3. Literal value of the word *day* in prophecy

The first principle of literalism is broadly what we would call grammatical-historical interpretation whose details as Guers describes them will be analyzed below. The second principle of distinction between Israel and the Church is explained unmistakably and powerfully by Guers: “In no part does Holy Scripture teach the absorption of Israel by the Church, in no part does it teach the absorption of the Church, or the nations by Israel.”<sup>18</sup> This feature will also be evaluated below.

The third principle constitutes a much narrower explanatory concept. It is, as Guers notes, “only a consequence, an application of literalism.”<sup>19</sup> One should not be surprised to find this thought in Guers' principles of interpretation. It is Darby who helped to popularize the idea at the Powerscourt Conferences in the early 1830s that the word *day* in prophecy means exactly one day and not one year. Guers argued, “The word day in prophecy, when it does not mean the day of the Lord, designates exactly a natural day of twenty-four hours; the system which assigns to this word the absolute value of a year does not seem to us to be proved.”<sup>20</sup> He cites what he believes is an absurdity if one follows the day-year theory in prophetic understanding. Those who hold to a prophetic day as one actual year would struggle with the fact that Satan in the book of Revelation is thrown down to earth and has only a short time to war with God (Rev. 12). This time is three and a half years or 1260 days (time, times, and half a time) using the Jewish calendar. The historicists who take this indicator as 1260 years have a difficult time in justifying how that can be a “short time.”<sup>21</sup> In the end, the Genevan pastor argues that the idea of day in prophecy which literalists affirm is the “foundation of futurism.”<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Guers, *Future of Israel*, 16-39.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 37.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 38.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*

All of these three principles (literalism, distinction between Israel and the Church, literal value of the word *day* in prophecy), in Guers' words, are summed up in the first one – literalism.<sup>23</sup> The distinction between Israel and the Church and the literal view of *day* flow out of literal interpretation. “This was the principle to which the early Christians conformed in the interpretation of prophecy” according to Guers. He finishes with an exhortation: “Let us return to that true principle, that of the Scriptures, and the early Christians.”<sup>24</sup> In light of these general principles delineated by Guers, a comparison to Ryrie should bear some fruit.

### Charles Ryrie

Over a century later, Ryrie, who had never heard of Guers,<sup>25</sup> attempted to summarize what he believed to be the core characteristics of dispensationalism. The theological landscape of Ryrie's time in 1965 had changed dramatically from what Guers experienced. By Ryrie's time, in North America dispensationalism had become a leading evangelical option in Bible interpretation. This may have affected the way his points were worded since there is a certain polemical tone to Ryrie's presentation. He is defending the dispensational tradition from the covenant theology critics. The criticism had grown in proportion to the success dispensationalism was having in the twentieth century.

In making the case for dispensationalism, Ryrie gave what he called the *sine qua non* or essential aspects of dispensationalism.<sup>26</sup> In a three-fold description of salient points, Ryrie begins by highlighting the distinction between Israel and the Church. He notes, “This is probably the most basic theological test of whether or not a man is a dispensationalist, and it is undoubtedly the most practical and conclusive. A man who fails to distinguish Israel and the Church will inevitably not hold to dispensational distinctions; and one who does, will.”<sup>27</sup> In this way, Ryrie believes that the main indicator of where one stands on this issue is the difference between Israel and the Church.<sup>28</sup>

Next, Ryrie discusses consistent literal interpretation as his second essential element of dispensationalism. He makes it clear that the distinction between Israel and the Church is grounded in this hermeneutical point. The term *consistent* means that all the Bible is approached the same way. Prophecy is interpreted using grammatical-historical interpretation just like other parts of the Bible. There is no special “prophetic hermeneutic” such as allegory assigned to prophetic portions of holy writ. There is no ambiguity in Ryrie's wording: “it [literal

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 39.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> When Dr. Ryrie came to speak at Baptist Bible Seminary several years ago, he informed me that he had never seen the work of Guers.

<sup>26</sup> Ryrie, *Dispensationalism Today*, 44-47.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 45.

<sup>28</sup> This does not mean that dispensationalists see no continuity between Israel and the Church. See my paper from last year's 2015 Council entitled “What Do Israel and the Church Share?”

interpretation] is interpretation that does not spiritualize or allegorize as nondispensationalism does.”<sup>29</sup> In fact, “consistent literalism is the basis for dispensationalism.”<sup>30</sup>

The third essential point in Ryrie’s outline is the doxological unifying theme of the Bible or the doxological purposes of God in biblical history.<sup>31</sup> Here the dispensational scholar notes with clarity that individual redemption is not the only purpose of God in history.<sup>32</sup> Although such redemption is a major purpose of God, it does not consume all of theology as it does in the Reformed approach. Covenant theologians have long complained about dispensationalism’s penchant for diversity in the Bible.<sup>33</sup> They view this as no different than higher critical methods which chop up the Bible into various parts leaving fragments and scraps on the table. According to these thinkers, dispensationalism has no unifying theme with which to make sense of the entire Bible’s story. Ryrie’s retort is to demonstrate that God’s purpose in history is doxological and not merely soteriological. In this way, the unifying principle of the Bible as understood by dispensationalists is fully God-centered and not man-centered.

### Guers and Ryrie

The similarities between Guers and Ryrie are obvious by means of a casual review.<sup>34</sup>

	Guers	Ryrie
1	<b>Literalism</b>	<b>Distinction between Israel and the Church</b>
2	<b>The diversity of classes and privileges in the entire body of the redeemed</b>	<b>Consistent literal interpretation</b>
3	The literal value of the word <i>day</i> in prophecy	Doxological unifying theme of the Bible

The first two points are essentially the same. The difference in order is merely cosmetic and a choice of presentation. Both Guers and Ryrie affirm strongly that the distinction between Israel and the Church is rooted in literal interpretation of prophetic Scripture.

<sup>29</sup> Ryrie, *Dispensationalism Today*, 45.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 97.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 46-47, 98-105.

<sup>32</sup> This point actually leads to a different philosophy of history for dispensationalism compared to covenant theology and also shows how the dispensations and covenants (for which there is not a one to one correspondence) function uniquely when taken at face value.

<sup>33</sup> Ryrie reacts to Oswald T. Allis on this point (98-99). See Allis, “Modern Dispensationalism and the Doctrine of the Unity of the Scriptures,” *The Evangelical Quarterly* 8 (January 1936): 24. The 1930s saw a strong point and counterpoint debate that was sometimes vociferous. The success of the Scofield Reference Bible and the spread of dispensationalism in North America at this time led to this hotly contested interaction.

<sup>34</sup> I provided a similar chart in Mike Stallard, “Emile Guers,” 44. I have made minor modifications here.

However, concerning Ryrie's third point, the doxological unifying theme of the Bible, one notices right away that there is no counterpart in Guers' list of basic interpretive principles. This does not mean that Guers' does not have this feature in his overall approach. He simply does not record it as one of the three main features of his method in *The Future of Israel*. Nonetheless, Guers notes that the truth of passages like Galatians 3:28 and the arrival of God's plan for the Church "does not hinder the Jewish nation, as such, from remaining for ever distinct from the Church and the nations."<sup>35</sup> The fact that Guers has written a book on the future of national Israel shows that he believes that God is doing more in history than individual redemption. That he mentions the nations may also point in the same direction. One would have hoped to see more from Guers on this point, but the conclusion that Ryrie and Guers agree may be a safe assessment. Both Ryrie and Guers seem to be historically conditioned in their statement of point three. They are responding to specific concerns of their own time and place. Guers' discussion of the word *day* in prophecy involves largely exegetical details that are usually assumed in Ryrie's time. Ryrie's words about the doxological unifying theme of the Bible are a systematic theology treatment. This historical context, however, cannot be used to dismiss the first two points which do not seem to be historically conditioned in the same way. This comparison of Guers to Ryrie leads to the clear affirmation that there is continuity concerning methodological issues in the history of dispensationalism. It is not best to state that Ryrie's *sine qua non* is a new synthesis.<sup>36</sup>

#### Guers and Literal Interpretation

Guers' discussion of literal interpretation in *The Future of Israel* would be at home to some degree in modern discussions of evangelical hermeneutics. Under the umbrella heading of literalism, he asserts three chief forms of prophetic facts yielded by the text: (1) the figurative or metaphorical form, (2) the symbolic form, (3) the literal, positive, historical form.<sup>37</sup> The difference between figures and symbols is that for figures there is a "borrowing" of "images in the order of ordinary and natural things" while for symbols, images are taken from "an order of supernatural and superhuman things."<sup>38</sup> The example Guers gives of a simple figure of speech

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<sup>35</sup> Guers, *Future of Israel*, 21.

<sup>36</sup> I made this point in "Emile Guers," 44-46.

<sup>37</sup> Guers, *Future of Israel*, 16.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid. Debate on how to label various figures of speech will always exist. The ultra-dispensationalist E. W. Bullinger has given interpreters the most complete analysis of figures of speech ever compiled in *Figures of Speech Used in the Bible* (London: Messrs. Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1898). Bullinger's massive tome is still valuable today although the sheer volume of it demonstrates the difficulty in sorting out and categorizing various figures of speech. His example also shows that the larger developing dispensational tradition did not overlook the category of figures of speech as it focused on literal interpretation. Dispensationalists (as well as other Bible interpreters) have been accused of being simplistic when it comes to interpreting figures of speech. See D. Brent Sandy, *Ploughshares and Pruning Hooks* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2002).

would be a woman representing a nation. He does not cite a passage in this initial statement. The example of symbolic language would be the monstrous beasts of Daniel and Revelation.<sup>39</sup>

These three forms found in prophetic texts “alternately clothe prophecy” in Guers’ words.<sup>40</sup> To illustrate, Guers explains that all three forms communicate the prediction of the Second Coming: figurative language (Isa. 63), symbolic language (Rev. 19:11-12), and “simple, natural, ordinary language” (Isa. 26:21). Similarly, he notes that the coming restoration of Israel, the chief subject of his book, is predicted in figurative terminology (Isa. 52:1-2), symbolic language (Eze. 37), and “simple, literal, and historical language” (Zech. 14:10-11). Sometimes it is difficult to assess distinctions in Guers’ figurative and symbolic categories as he uses them in his book. He is wrestling, like us, with what the text yields -- what we would normally label as grammatical-historical interpretation. In all of this discussion, it is not clear that Guers makes a distinction between literal interpretation as a hermeneutical title for grammatical-historical interpretation, which encompasses all contextual and textually-based interpretation, and literal as the opposite of figurative or symbolic. It is impossible, however, to miss the focus on textually-based interpretation at the heart of Guers’ handling of prophecy in the Bible. Ultimately, the Genevan pastor believes that the “meaning which springs most naturally from the reading of the Word of God, is also in general that which inspires us with the most confidence.”<sup>41</sup>

### Rules of Literalism

While literal interpretation itself is a kind of rule as seen above, Guers mentions more detailed aspects of literalism as he understands its use. First, he declares that the “most simple interpretation of the prophecies seems also the only true and admissible one, when it is not contrary to Scripture nor to reason.”<sup>42</sup> An elaboration follows: “in other words, when it is not absurd, nor contrary to the Bible.” In discussing this issue, Guers gives the following description:

All that prophecy presents of facts in simple, natural language, whether more or less mixed with these metaphorical expressions we meet with continually in the most ordinary language, we will take, according to the letter, not considering ourselves free to interpret figuratively that which is not out of the order of natural things, whose direct meaning is clear, evident, and capable of a literal realization, for example, Rev. xx.<sup>43</sup>

Several important points emerge from this statement: (1) there exists in prophetic passages a mixture of natural and metaphorical language; (2) even in such cases the default interpretive rule

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<sup>39</sup> A distinction between prophetic language and apocalyptic genre is not a question that emerges with any detail in Guers’ writings.

<sup>40</sup> Guers, *Future of Israel*, 16.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*

is literalism; (3) one is bound to the interpretive letter unless there is something out of the ordinary in a passage; (4) Guers is clearly premillennial as a result!

Secondly, Guers teaches that context is a key to establish literalism. After noting the standard argument that Second Coming predictions should be understood literally since First Advent predictions were fulfilled in a straight forward way, he acknowledges the use of levels of context. At the simplest level, if a figure of speech or a symbol appears in a text and in the same passage elsewhere there is a literal expression of the same idea, “the literal passage ought to explain the symbolic passage.”<sup>44</sup> Guers appears to see this as common sense about how language works: “Simple, ordinary, positive language always surpasses metaphorical language; the historical form will always interpret the emblematical form.”<sup>45</sup> Lurking in the background is an aversion to subjective interpretation: “instead of asking our imaginations, always too ready to wander, the explanation of a figure or a symbol, we will accept, in the true submission of faith, that which God Himself has already given of it.”<sup>46</sup> In doing this, Guers once again is pushing toward a textually-based interpretation that avoids subjective or theological intrusions.

Another level of context is found in the use of parallel passages (an example of analogy of Scripture). As an illustration, Guers comments that within the book of Daniel, chapters 2 and 7 inform each other as the book is read as a whole. Furthermore, there is interpretation of the symbols within the book itself which must be taken seriously – “first the emblematic sign, then its explanation in literal language.”<sup>47</sup> While not using the terminology, he is asserting the development of a biblical theology of the entire book of Daniel without resort to other unnecessary sources.<sup>48</sup> Then, he moves to the book of Revelation: “As to the Apocalypse, the symbols there used generally find their explanation in Daniel, or should be interpreted by means of analogy and general harmony.” Again, without using the terminology, Guers is practicing the significance of progressive revelation for interpretation. To wrap up the discussion of levels of context, Guers notes, “In reading figurative or symbolic prophecies, let us take their meaning according as it is given in the chapter or book we are studying, if it is not found there, let us seek for it in other parts of Scripture by the aid of parallelism, and let us not admit it till we find it is sustained throughout the prophecy which is occupying us.”<sup>49</sup> In the end, all levels of context should yield an interpretation that makes sense and is textually based. Much of *The Future of Israel* demonstrates in practice these stated principles and features of literalism.

### Literalism, Israel, and the Church

Guers’ second main principle of interpretation is the distinction between Israel and the Church. After stating the axiom, he immediately notes in language we could anachronistically

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 18.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 18-19.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 19.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

call Ryrie-like, “This principle is strictly comprised in literalism; it is at the basis, only a consequence, an application of it.”<sup>50</sup> *The Future of Israel* gives more space to the distinction between Israel and the Church than it does to literalism even though literalism is a foundation. This is, no doubt, due to the subject matter of the book. Toward the end of this section, however, the Genevan pastor eloquently revisits the hermeneutical issue with potent language.

When we read a prophecy of the Old Testament, let us commence by establishing its first direct literal Jewish sense; then on that basis, let us build the second allegorical meaning; let us interpret it before applying it; then our personal and practical applications will be only more complete and striking, and read in this way the chapters we have mentioned (Jer. xxxi.; Ezekiel xxxvi.), and many others, will no longer present any difficulty. But on the principle of interpretation, which sees a metaphor everywhere, in every part a mystical meaning, always substituting the secondary application for the original signification, prophecy assumes a false colour, it becomes perverted, forcibly nullified by being allegorized; a veil is put before our eyes, the facts do not correspond with the words, the sacred text must be twisted, and put in a straight waistcoat to conform it to our traditional systems, and to make it say what it does not say, what it refuses to say; prophecy becomes diminished, impoverished, it sickens in *de-literalizing*, in *de-judaizing* it, it loses its amplitude, its beauty, its fullness; its moral applications have neither the same life, nor the same interest, nor the same variety, nor the same savour.<sup>51</sup>

Several elements of this remarkable statement must be examined. First, by “second allegorical meaning” Guers is referring to application or, in later Hirschian terms, significance. Notice he immediately uses the concept of application after using the word *allegorical*. Later in the quote he negatively uses the term *allegorized* to speak of the interpretation of meaning.

Second, Guers is pointing us to the Jewish character of the Old Testament. God used Jews to give us the Old Testament. There is a historical context to be faithfully observed. This context is Jewish. As a result one cannot read later non-Jewish, Church experience or developments into the Old Testament text. It simply cannot be divorced from its Jewish character by following tradition. His two sample passages are new covenant predictions. They cannot be viewed as “Church only” truth. The promises to Israel cannot be annulled.

Third, prophecy cannot be de-literalized. That is, it cannot be stripped of its powerful and literal truth. It must be taken at face value. One must go where God goes. The Genevan pastor adds the term *de-judaizing* here as well. This reinforces what has been said about the Jewish character of the Old Testament. But, more than that, the term shows that a literal interpretation is following the intended textual meaning for the Jews when the text was actually written and given to them as a people. In the teaching of Guers’ book, this means more than anything that there is a future for the Jewish people and national Israel: “The restoration of this people is the principal subject of Old Testament prophecy.”<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 21.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 36. Emphasis is given by Guers. I have dealt with parts of this statement in a different context. See Mike Stallard, “Rediscovery,” 67-69.

<sup>52</sup> Guers, *Future of Israel*, 372.

## Conclusion

In light of the previous discussion, an analytical summary would be helpful in driving home the chief observations that surface in this comparison of Guers and Ryrie, especially since many scholars have had little or no exposure to Guers.

1. Literal interpretation of the Bible in the sense of grammatical-historical understanding is foundational to all interpretive efforts including prophecy.
2. Metaphors and figures of speech are part of everyday language that must be observed in interpretation. Symbols are also found in Scripture and are usually defined for us by other passages in the same text, book, or in parallel or antecedent passages.
3. There should be no rush to see metaphors and figures of speech when the language of the text does not demand them. Literal understanding is the default and is only abandoned when absurdity results or there are clear contradictions in the Bible.
4. Allegorization in the sense of overall mystical, spiritualized, or subjective interpretation is to be avoided at all costs. To use modern terminology, we can never use reader response in biblical studies to determine basic meaning.
5. Later revelation (church truth) should not be read back into earlier revelation which gives promises to national Israel. The new covenant promises are cited by Guers in this regard.
6. A literal understanding of prophecy in the end-time parts of the Bible lends itself to futurism rather than to preterism, historicism, or idealism.
7. Ryrie's astute observations about the nature of dispensationalism are generally accurate when the historical tradition is analyzed. The contribution of Guers helps to see this continuity within what has been labeled traditional dispensationalism.

There is nothing surprising or startling in this list of understanding based upon the current study. Guers is one of us (traditional dispensationalists)! There will certainly be disagreements among dispensationalists like Darby, Guers, Kelly, Grant, Gaebelien, Scofield, Chafer, Walvoord, Ryrie, Pentecost, McClain, and current traditionalists. No one can dispute the presence of discontinuity in the history of dispensational interpretation as is true of all traditions. Collectively, however, the points above show the other half of the story. When viewed from that angle, there is an amazing continuity among traditional proponents that helps to identify who they are as a movement. The significance is great. Whether one starts with an emphasis on historical continuity or discontinuity changes the way that historical arguments factor into our theological debates. This makes Ryrie's sweeping and largely correct observations far more valuable.