**Dispensationalism: A Biblical Theology**

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We all appreciate Dispensationalism because it is rooted in Scripture. And as a unified theology, should we expect the contents of Scripture to tell one complete story? It is the thesis of this paper that it tells a complete narrative; with a beginning, a middle, and an end. As such, it gives expression to what the title says, A Biblical Theology rather than a Systematic, thematic or topical Theology.

Since its’ heyday in the twentieth century, there has remained a question about one essential of its’ *sine qua non*---literal interpretation. Charles Ryrie taught us that **literal** interpretation, defined as a **normal or plain language use,** helped avoid the distortions of allegorical interpretation present in Covenant Theology. The question that remains, revolves around what literal means? The common answer has been a normal use in the language. So, if there are ten entries for one term in the lexicon, and nine passages use the term with the same meaning, then those nine would share the literal meaning. Kevin Vanhoozer, not a dispensationalist, has proposed that literal interpretation should be defined as an author’s **literary rather than language use**. The claim rests on the contention that literary is a more natural way to characterize what we’re doing in **normal interpretation**. Whereas formerly, literal interpretation rested on the way language is normally used in various different contexts, literary rests in the way the language is used in the immediate literary context. It is the author’s intended meaning expressed in the literary context that defines literal interpretation. Should we consider changing our definition of literal interpretation?

I would propose that in fact that is a necessary change to be made. We will still advocate literal interpretation but define it as the literary interpretation. The older definition of literal has led to some perplexing problems. In a crucial example, Habakkuk 2:4; the verb, *emunah is* normally translated in the Hebrew Lexicon as faithfulness. So, the passage would be translated “the righteous one will live by his faithfulness”, (recognized as a suitable alternative in CSB) Yet when Romans 1:17 quotes it, Paul writes, “just as it is written: The righteous shall live by faith”. Inerrancy would validate Paul’s textual interpretation as correct and thus what Habakkuk ought to mean. Thus, literal as a normal language use has introduced confussion. In a literary use, Habakkuk 2:4 contains a principle of judgment. And that judgment prescribes a person’s standing before God which rests on what one believes not on what one is consistently doing.

Granting that understanding of literal interpretation, the Dispensational Model of

Biblical Theology changes somewhat. As Ryrie acknowledged, the number of dispensations is not an agreed upon conclusion nor a revealed issue. In Genesis the literary genre is narrative-history, and Genesis 1-11 is the **literary setting** that sets the stage for the **historical** account that follows.

Thus, it expresses the beginning of the story rather than three dispensations. These

three have caused problems for me. The dispensations are disproportionally brief compared to promise, law, and grace. In addition, they are defined differently. Ryrie’s final definition of a dispensation is: “a dispensation is a distinguishable economy in the outworking of God’s purposes” (*Dispensationalism, 28)* That is distinct from the way the first three dispensations would be defined: “a period of time during which man is tested in respect to obedience to some *specific* revelation of God’s will”. This is the definition found in the *Scofield Reference Bible.* Further, prominence of the test of obedience contributed to the early confusion concerning salvation by faith. Rather than changing our definition of dispensation, it is preferred to consider the definition of literal interpretation as understanding meaning in the

context of literary usage. The result would reframe Genesis 1-11’

**Genesis 1-11.** If the change is accepted, then Genesis 1-11 sets the stage for God’s addressing of evil. God created a good creation, while evil was permitted at the fringes; in the

initial condition of creation,1:2 and in darkness remaining in time, 1:3,4. God’s purpose in addressing evil would begin with his creation of Adam and Eve to mediate his rule on earth. In the Garden, that mediation would revolve around the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Eating from that tree would incorporate evil in whatever Adam said or did. While God named the tree, he had not yet directly distinguished between the two. So, when Adam ate from the fruit of the tree, he lost his rule to the Serpent. Further, both Adam and Eve died as God had warned. The Serpent now ruled the creation as the power of the air who now rules over the children of disobedience. (Eph. 2:2) And Adam and Eve would be cast out of the garden.

So, in **Genesis 3-11**, God reset his purposes to overcome evil and have mankind included in opposing evil:

1. to restore Adam and Eve in relationship with God through a sacrificial

covering for each. (Gen.3:20,21)

1. to delegate the judgment of the Serpent, from the promised descendant of the woman. (Gen. 3:15)
2. to institute the Noahic Covenant in which human government is delegated to

mankind with the responsibility to protect human life. (Gen. 9:1-17)

1. to judge city life at Babel, by dividing the population into different language

speakers and nations. (Gen. 11:1-9)

This introduces four purposes of God to confront the basic problem of evil in the fallen creation through mankind in relation to God. Thus, the framework for confronting evil, in response to the usurped rule of Satan in human history, was set. Three books reflect these purposes: the *Gospels* are transitional books which set a new stage consisting of and following Messiah’s first Advent and then *Daniel and Revelation* draw these purposes to a fulfillment.

In each of these books, the advent of the seed of the woman will represent an initial fulfillment, in the serpents striking the heel of Messiah. (Gen. 3:15) The Gospels also anticipate the final fulfillment of Genesis 3:15. The synoptic Gospel’s Olivet Discourse reveals that second advent of the woman’s descendant who controls the climax of human history. So, each of these three books will be examined more closely to sketch their role in the fulfillment of a Biblical Theology.

**Gospels.**  Gospels as narrative-historical literature, each feature the completion of the prophecy of Messiah in his first advent. In the Synoptics, Messiah is revealed as the Servant of the Lord, introduced in Isaiah 40-53. Mark in particular, features the service of the Lord who was baptized and transfigured in anticipation of his future reign. The Gospel of John featured the hardening of the hearts in the people (Isa. 6) although many believed in his name, even among the rulers. (12:37-43) Then all four Gospels reach their climax in the suffering, death, and resurrection of Christ. This alludes to Genesis 3:15 as the serpent strikes the woman’s seed. This revelation in the Gospels introduce four new purposes which will govern the age of grace, in confronting and overcoming evil.

1. to proclaim the Gospel. (John 20:31)
2. to experience transformation over evil in the believer, by the ministry of the Holy Spirit (John 7:37-39)
3. to build believers into the church (Matt. 16:18,19) which is the body of

Christ on earth, which continues the Great Commission (Matt. 28:16-20)

1. to be Christian citizens in national governments (John 18:36,37)

Apocalyptic revelation consists of visions of the ultimate resolution in the conflict

between Satan and God. Those visions of the end are introduced by conflict in the history

of the nations between Satan and God. The historical conflict is not resolved but transitions into the future resolution of the conflict in the Son of Man. The books of *Daniel and Revelation* are both prophetic in reference but apocalyptic in literary form.

**Daniel**  Daniel was a deported servant of God from Israel to Babylon, after the nation Israel had forsaken God and the people were about to go into captivity. This will introduce what Jesus would call “the times of the Gentiles”. (Luke 21:24) Daniel was a part of the remnant going into captivity. His role was to interpret God’s vision of four glamorous, Gentile nations starting with Babylon and given to Nebuchadnezzar. (2) Then almost as a parallel vision, he received and envisioned the same four, but now as vicious nations. (7) Their reign on earth reached a climax, as heaven weighed in and chose the Son of Man (the Stone not cut out with hands) as the final mediator of God’s rule. So Daniel will focus evil found in the nations as they

will be judged.

Supplementing these visions was Daniel 9. In it, God decreed 70-7’s of years to accomplish God’s purposes through Israel and God’s holy city:

1. to bring rebellion to an end,
2. to put a stop to sin,
3. to atone for iniquity,
4. to bring in everlasting righteousness,
5. to seal up vision and prophecy
6. to anoint the most holy place. (9:24)

These purposes will be realized through the Anointed One, the Messiah. In his first advent, Messiah will be “cut off” in a fulfillment of the serpent striking the heel of the seed of the woman. (Gen. 3:15) Then the full accomplishment of these purposes begins before and at the second advent.

After Messiah was cut off, he will have nothing, and Jerusalem would be destroyed. (9:26) A parenthesis of silence appeared after 69-7’s have passed and before the 70th-7, which was yet to appear. That final seven year period will usher in the second advent of Messiah, as the first two earlier visions had indicated. At his return, the desolator, Satan will be destroyed, as the Serpent’s head is struck. (9:27, alluding to Gen.3:15)

**Revelation** The second apocalyptic book overlaps themes introduced in Daniel.

The intervening period after the 69th-7, about which Daniel is silent, is the church age. And seven churches are introduced, representing the present time of John the Apostle, who pastored the church in Ephesus. Like Daniel, the conflict with evil appeared in history in the churches, rather than the nations. (2,3) The key term in this conflict is *nikeo*, translated as either “overcomer” or “conqueror”. In the church age, evil will be a struggle for each believer and in each church. Only one church has no evil mentioned as present. (Philadelphia). But in each letter, there is a promise to one who is willing to hear, and the **overcomer** of evil will receive a reward.

The same term appears in the visions (chapters 4-19), in which the White Horsed Rider (6:2 and 19:11-16) is introduced as the **Conqueror**, who rides forth to **conquer** evil present on earth. In the climax, he **conquers** as he makes war for justice at the battle of Armageddon. He will then **rule** with a rod of iron as King of Kings and Lord of Lords for one thousand years. (19:11,15)

During the years of tribulation, he both opens the **seals** and is the white horsed rider in the first seal as **Conqueror** going forth from God’s throne. These visions expand upon the seventieth seven of Dan. 9:27. Thus the nations formed out of the human race will be defeated as agents of the Dragon, and led by the Roman Beast (Rev. 13,17,19)

The final purpose of God to be realized is the confrontation with evil in the cities of the world. Mystery Babylon the Great will appear in Rome, as the city of Babel had. But evil will destroy itself as the Beast carried Babylon to prominence only to turn against Babylon in jealousy to destroy it. (Rev. 17)

That city will be replaced after the second Advent of Messiah by the New Jerusalem.

The city descends from heaven as part of the New Heavens and Earth, yet it first appears in the present creation during the Millennial Kingdom. The Glory of the city will be expressed in the convergence of the Glory of the Throne Sitter and the Light of the Lamb. And so, in the history of the present creation, God’s purposes of both establishing a mediated rule of God on earth and a reconciliation of the redeemed from a fallen world; both purposes are fulfilled.

That completes the story and presents a Biblical Theology which tells the story of the characters in a Systematic Theology. We know this Theology as Dispensationalism. It is to be preferred among the various models of Biblical Theology because it rests consistently on the

progress of revelation within the whole canon of Scripture.