

The Hermeneutics of Historic Premillennialism and Jeremiah 31:31-34*¹

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INTRODUCTION

How the Old and New Testaments relate to one another is one of the central issues in biblical hermeneutics. Closely related to this topic is the relationship between the nation of Israel and the universal church. How one wades through these issues of continuity and/or discontinuity is normally the point of departure between the various camps of Covenant Theology and Dispensationalism. While these issues may reflect the point of departure, the root of the distinction goes back to the underlying presuppositions and beliefs about hermeneutics. That is to say, what one believes about the relationship of a text to its meaning and how a reader accesses that meaning has far-reaching impact. All other areas of theology and biblical understanding are a result of the reader's hermeneutical presuppositions and practices.

Premillennialism is an eschatological view that finds itself on both sides of the covenant theology/dispensational divide. As a result of a consistent method of interpretation, all who would subscribe to dispensationalism would be premillennial in their eschatology. This is not

¹ I wish to express my appreciation to Adam Myers, M.Div. for invaluable assistance on this paper.

true, however, for covenant theology. Within this camp, premillennialists can be found alongside the amillennialists and postmillennialists.

Among dispensationalists, most would also be pretribulationists: that is, they would look forward to the coming Rapture of the church prior to the 7-year time of the Great Tribulation preceding the return of Christ. Most covenant premillennialists would be posttribulationists: they are looking forward to the coming Rapture of the church at the end of the Great Tribulation, and coinciding with the return of Christ. This post-tribulational view is often called "historic premillennialism" or "classic premillennialism." Though both views are premillennial, and both eschatologies are within the scope of orthodox Christianity, they arise from distinct interpretive views and practices.

At the core of these issues is the interpretive relationship between the Testaments. Both views claim to employ a literal interpretation, and interpreters in both premillennial camps work hard at understanding the historical, grammatical issues inherent in rightly understanding the Scriptures. But the interpreters look at the timeline of progressive revelation from different ends. For the dispensational pretribulational premillennialist, the timeline is viewed from Creation forward. As God unfolds his progressive revelation along, each text is understood in light of what has been previously revealed, and what it in turn adds to the Scriptures. In other words, the New Testament would be understood in light of the Old Testament. Later revelation is to be understood through the lens of earlier revelation, and not vice versa.

For the classic or historic premillennialist, the timeline is viewed from the present backward. Therefore each text is to be understood in light of the whole of Scripture. The Old Testament then, must be interpreted not only within its own context, but must also be recast in

light of New Testament revelation. Thus, from this perspective, earlier revelation must be reinterpreted and re-understood in light of later revelation.²

In this paper, I will summarize briefly both interpretive viewpoints and present a test passage as a demonstration. Moreover, I will argue throughout that the dispensational hermeneutic is more consistent with the original intended meaning, and that it should therefore be normative for the church.

OVERVIEW OF DISPENSATIONAL PREMILLENNIALISM

Charles Ryrie's three essential elements to dispensational theology provide a solid summary of the issues that set dispensational teaching apart.³ To Ryrie, what makes dispensational theology distinct is:

- Clear distinction between Israel and the Church
- Consistent literal interpretation of Scripture
- Glory of God as the purpose of history

These three issues are not independent from one another, but rather build upon each other. Literal interpretation, consistently and diligently applied, will reveal a distinction in God's plans and purposes for the nation of Israel and his church. This distinction will in turn shape the eschatological views of the interpreter as he seeks to understand how God will fulfill his purpose of self-glorification as he brings history to a close. This hermeneutic is key and will be discussed in more detail later.

² Borrowing from both of these perspectives, yet also remaining distinct from both, is the "complementary hermeneutic" of progressive dispensationalism, which begins with the dispensationalist hermeneutic, but also claims to find additional but non-contradictory meanings in the Old Testament text with the later revelation of the New Testament.

³ Charles C. Ryrie, *Dispensationalism* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1995), 38-41.

Dispensational teaching believes God will glorify himself through the distinct purposes he has for Israel and the Church by rapturing the church prior to the Great Tribulation in which Israel again becomes the focus of God's dealings with the world. Unannounced, Jesus Christ will come in the clouds to call his church out of the world. This event will begin a 7-year period in which the world will face tremendous trouble and persecution in nearly every imaginable category. The Antichrist will unite the world under his leadership and will, as his name suggests, lead them away from worship of the true and living God.

The second coming of Christ will mark the end of this 7-year terror, as he defeats the Antichrist, binds Satan, and initiates a 1,000-year kingdom under his rule which will then lead into the eternal state in the new creation of the New Heavens and New Earth.

OVERVIEW OF HISTORIC PREMILLENNIALISM

Historic premillennialism is so called because, it is claimed, it reflects the kind of premillennialism espoused by the early church fathers and writers. Similarly to dispensational teaching, historic premillennialism looks forward to a future kingdom in which Christ will literally, physically reign on the earth. Some historic premillennialists such as Ladd view the millennium as a specific, literal 1,000 year period.⁴ Others believe the kingdom will be physical and literal, but the 1,000 years represented may simply be figurative for a very long time.⁵

For historic premillennialism, the end of this age and the return of Christ will be marked by the rapture of the church, in which we will meet Christ in the clouds as he returns to establish his millennial kingdom. Thus the rapture and the return of Christ are contemporaneous.

⁴ George Eldon Ladd, "Historic Premillennialism," in *The Meaning of the Millennium*, (ed. Robert Clouse: Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1977), 17.

⁵ James Hamilton, "An Evening of Eschatology," *Desiring God Website*, (2009): n.p. [cited 15 November 2015]. Online: <http://www.desiringgod.org/messages/an-evening-of-eschatology>.

Before this can occur, historic premillennialism teaches that certain events must first occur before Christ returns:

- The Gospel must be proclaimed to all nations (Matt. 24:14).
- Israel will be converted (Rom. 11:25ff).
- There will be a Great Apostasy (Matt. 24:10; 2 Thess. 2:3).
- The Great Tribulation will occur (Matt. 24:21)
- The Antichrist or Man of Sin will be revealed (2 Thess. 2:3)⁶

Though the timing of the rapture and tribulation is different, there are some clear similarities to dispensational eschatology. Most prominent among them is the physical millennial kingdom. However, there are also specific and important differences, and there is a clean break between the two eschatological views in key areas. Historic premillennialism finds its home among the various expressions of covenant theology.⁷ Because it is a view of covenant theology, it teaches that the church—and not the nation of Israel—is at center stage as God’s mediatorial people during these eschatological times.

As will be explained in this paper, historic premillennialism is a view arrived at by wavering between literal and symbolic or spiritual interpretations of the Scriptures. Passages regarding the return of Christ and his coming kingdom, such as Revelation 20, are interpreted literally while prophetic passages regarding the future of the nation of Israel are interpreted symbolically, having a spiritual fulfillment that is met in the church as the new Israel.

⁶ Robert James Utley, *Hope in Hard Times--The Final Curtain: Revelation*. (Marshall, TX: Bible Lessons International, 2001), 176-177.

⁷ For this reason, some authors consider it helpful to employ a term like "covenant premillennialism" to help clarify the distinction, although this paper will use the better-known term "historic premillennialism."

ISRAEL AND THE CHURCH DURING THE MILLENNIUM

Both dispensational and historic premillennial views are eagerly looking forward to Christ's return. For the dispensationalist, the millennial reign of Christ will be mediated through the nation of Israel as the Lord sits on David's throne in Jerusalem to exercise his rule. However, for the historic premillennialist, it is not the nation of Israel at center stage during the millennium, but the church.⁸ The nature of the millennial kingdom takes a significantly different—and distinctively covenant—shape under this view.

In his portions of *The Meaning of the Millennium*, Ladd strenuously argues against the “Jewishness of the millennial kingdom.”⁹ Because Christ is the fulfillment of the Old Testament sacrificial system, there can be no purpose to a literal rebuilt temple. Because Christ inaugurated his kingdom in the hearts of men during his ministry—and particularly in his resurrection—there can be no validity to an earthly rule from a physical throne and city. Because God's purposes for the Old Testament nation of Israel are completed, the millennial kingdom must be mediated through the church, and not through Israel.

HERMENEUTICS OF PREMILLENNIALIST VIEWS

THE HERMENEUTICS OF HISTORIC PREMILLENNIALISM

Like dispensationalists, historic premillennialists also practice historical-grammatical-literal hermeneutics. Unfortunately, however, its proponents also practice and argue for a spiritualized hermeneutic at times. Ladd defends this practice by saying, “The fact is that the

⁸ Stanley J. Grenz, *The Millennial Maze: Sorting Out Evangelical Options*, (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1992), 26.

⁹ Ladd, “Historic Premillennialism,” 94.

New Testament frequently interprets Old Testament prophecies in a way not suggested by the Old Testament context.”¹⁰ He continues, “The Old Testament is reinterpreted in light of the Christ event.”¹¹

Thus, the significance of the matter in historic premillennialism is not the absence of, but rather in the inconsistency of applying the literal hermeneutic.¹² This is particularly evident in Michael Lawrence’s book *Biblical Theology in the Life of the Church*.¹³ His first chapter is entitled “Exegetical Tools: Grammatical-Historical Method.” As one might expect from a chapter with this title, there is much to commend as he writes of working carefully through the details of the text and context to arrive at the author’s intended meaning.

For example, he writes that “words, when placed in sentences and paragraphs, convey meaning. And not just any meaning. They convey the meaning of the author who constructed the sentence and the paragraph, as a reflection of his authorial intent. As readers of words, and particularly as readers of God’s Word, our obligation—and privilege—is to read in such a way as to recover and understand the meaning the author wanted to communicate.”¹⁴

He continues: “The basic method of exegesis that we use to determine an author’s original intent has come to be known as the grammatical-historical method...Discerning the

¹⁰ Ladd, “Historic Premillennialism,” 20.

¹¹ Ladd, “Historic Premillennialism,” 21.

¹² This accusation of inconsistency is apparently conceded by historic premillennialists, though it is defended as appropriate. Consider this from Don Payne: “One feature of the theological method that differentiates historic premillennialism from older dispensational versions of premillennialism is its recognition of, and willingness to live with, tension. Having chosen a basic posture of literal interpretation yet recognizing that in some spiritual sense the church does fulfill the role of Old Testament Israel, historic premillennialists live with tension and are criticized by both dispensationalists and amillennialists for their apparently selective approach.” (Don J. Payne, “The Theological Method,” in *A Case for Historic Premillennialism: An Alternative to “Left Behind” Eschatology* (ed. Craig L. Blomberg and Sung Wook Chung: Grand Rapids: Baker, 2009), 97.)

¹³ Michael Lawrence, *Biblical Theology in the Life of the Church: A Guide for Ministry*, (Wheaton: Crossway, 2010).

¹⁴ Lawrence, *Biblical Theology*, 40.

meaning of the text in this way immediately plunges us into an exploration and study of the grammar, syntax, and literary and historical context of the words we're reading—thus the phrase: grammatical-historical method.”¹⁵

Thus far in Lawrence's description and prescription there is little against which to argue. He is correct to say that the author's intended meaning is present in the text itself, and that that meaning is accessed and understood by the reader through a careful grammatical-historical study. These are points with which dispensationalists would heartily endorse and promote.

Later in the same chapter, though, he seemingly reverses course. This is the hermeneutical inconsistency for which historic premillennialism is known. In discussing the genre of prophecy he writes,

In the case of prophecy, the shape of the story of the Bible as a whole is crucial. We need to remember that revelation is progressive, and in the revelation of Jesus Christ, we've been given both the main point and the end of the story. This means that we have an advantage over Old Testament readers. We work from the story of the whole Bible back to the prophecy, not the other way around... Therefore the New Testament determines the ultimate meaning of Old Testament prophecy, not the other way around.¹⁶

His last sentence in this quote is particularly telling. For Lawrence, it would seem the genre of prophecy requires special treatment in which the grammatical-historical method is no longer relevant or useful. It is not the text itself which carries the authorial meaning as he had earlier explained. Rather, a New Testament text, studied grammatically, historically, and

¹⁵ Lawrence, *Biblical Theology*, 41.

¹⁶ Lawrence, *Biblical Theology*, 49.

literally, has a meaning which carries back to Old Testament prophecies and fundamentally changes the meanings of the words and sentences on the page. In other words, the meaning of the first text is not found within its own words and context, but instead is found in a second text. He provides the example of Isaiah 11's discussion of the reign of the Branch of Jesse and says, "In piling up these images, many of which are poetic, we need to recognize that the prophet is making a theological point, and not necessarily a literal historical prediction."¹⁷

It is in this case, the question must be asked as to the ultimate purpose of the words on the Old Testament pages. If their meaning and significance is found only in texts written hundreds of years later and in different historical contexts, what inherent value do they really have? By arguing for this inconsistent hermeneutic, historic premillennialism is left with the untenable result of having a God who has said what he does not mean, and has meant what he has not said.

THE HERMENEUTICS OF DISPENSATIONAL PREMILLENNIALISM

Foundational to the dispensational system, on the other hand, is *consistency* in employing a literal hermeneutic when studying the Scriptures—for all texts, genres, and literary types. The concept of literal interpretation is frequently misunderstood by its critics, however. The practice of a literal interpretation is not to read a figure of speech or poetic description "literally," meaning in a wooden or simplistic fashion. Instead, it means to seek to understand a text according to its literary genre, taking into account figures of speech, etc. It is to "view the books of the Bible from the standpoint of normal language communication whereby the Author/author

¹⁷ Lawrence, *Biblical Theology*, 49.

communicated a meaning, which can be shared through the textual medium of Scripture.”¹⁸

Because of this, the goal of a historical-grammatical-literal hermeneutic is to “discern the intention of the human author by examining what the author affirms in the historical context of his writing and the correlate all the material related to a topic in a compressive manner.”¹⁹

Therefore a literal hermeneutic is not a wooden or simplistic hermeneutic, but one that seeks the plain meaning of a text as it would and should be understood in the normal usage of language.

The nature of language is such that the literal or plain meaning of any communication is necessary for real communication to happen.²⁰ To argue against this hermeneutic is a failed proposition before it has even begun: in making the argument against a plain reading of a text, the one arguing assumes his point will be read and understood as he intended. That is to say, he must assume his reader will employ a literal hermeneutic in order to understand and agree with his words arguing against a literal understanding of a text!

The dispensationalist keeps historical, grammatical, literary, and linguistic factors in mind, and seeks to interpret the text before him with the most natural reading it will allow. This is especially true in the case of prophetic works such as that in focus here.

Those prophecies which have already been fulfilled have been fulfilled literally. This being the case, why would a person look for future fulfillment of prophecy to be fulfilled another way? “...the prophecies in the Old Testament concerning the first coming of Christ—His birth,

¹⁸ Nathan Hoff, "Meaning-Types and Text-Tokens: An Examination of the Relationship Between the Biblical Text and Its Meaning," *The Theory & Practice of Biblical Hermeneutics: Essays in Honor of Elliott E. Johnson*, (ed. H. Wayne House and Forrest S. Weiland: Silverton: Lampion, 2015), 15.

¹⁹ David Mappes and H. Wayne House. "A Biblical and Theological Discussion of Traditional Dispensational Premillennialism." *JMAT* (2012): 8.

²⁰ Ryrie, *Dispensationalism*, 81.

His rearing, His ministry, His death, His resurrection—were all fulfilled literally. This argues strongly for the literal method.”²¹

PREMILLENNIAL VIEWS & PROGRESSIVE REVELATION

For the text to have meaningful or real value, our interpretation of the text must follow God’s progressive revelation. The revelation of the New Testament is built on the foundation of the Old Testament, therefore we must seek to understand the Old Testament on its own terms in order to then properly understand the New Testament.

The dispensationalist, valuing the progressive revelation of God throughout history, recognizes that the true literal interpretation of Scripture requires each new revelatory writing to provide the foundation upon which future revelation is to be interpreted. Therefore the New Testament must be interpreted in light of prior revelation, viz. the Old Testament.

The historic premillennialist, on the other hand, argues through progressive revelation that the teaching of the New Testament, being more explicit and more complete, must be read back into the Old Testament. The Old Testament therefore, is to be reinterpreted in light of New Testament revelation. Ladd explains, “Dispensationalism forms its eschatology by a literal interpretation of the Old Testament and then fits the New Testament into it. A nondispensational eschatology forms its theology from the explicit teaching of the New Testament.”²² He continues by explaining that the Old Testament promises to the nation of Israel are fulfilled instead in the church.

²¹ Ryrie, *Dispensationalism*, 81.

²² Ladd, “Historic Premillennialism,” 27.

In critiquing the dispensationalist view, historic premillennialist James Hamilton offers the following illustration in support of his biblical theological hermeneutic: "...such an approach seems analogous to a botanist examining an acorn to predict what will sprout from the seed... Rather than trying to transcend our ultimate philosophical and theological conclusions, we should use them to help us understand, with constant readiness to submit them to the searchlight of Scripture."²³ Thus, to Hamilton, the dispensationalist is reading the Old Testament in a way that imagines an acorn might grow into a potato! This of course is a ridiculous accusation. Wherever literal interpretation leads the exegete, if it leads him into contradiction with Scripture, he is doing it wrong!

While Hamilton's analogy falls short on a number of counts, it seems strange to this writer that an author who fails to see the distinction between Israel and the Church would accuse another view of such an absurdity. It is precisely because dispensationalism interprets Scripture with consistent literalism that it can demonstrate the "acorn" in the Old Testament will grow into the mighty oak of Jesus Christ who will fulfill his purposes for both Israel and the Church. The confusion by Hamilton of the two entities results precisely in the error of which he would accuse the dispensationalist!

THE NEW COVENANT IN HISTORIC PREMILLENNIALISM: JEREMIAH 31:31-34

As Lawrence has demonstrated above, it is clear that the historic premillennialist does in fact practice a historical-grammatical-literal method of interpretation. The problem is that this

²³ James M. Hamilton Jr., *God's Glory in Salvation Through Judgment: A Biblical Theology*, (Wheaton: Crossway, 2010), Kindle loc. 734.

exegetical method is set aside when studying much of the Old Testament, and particularly when studying prophecy. The selective hermeneutic means he is both premillennial (from applying a literal hermeneutic at times) and covenant (from applying a spiritualized hermeneutic at times).

This inconsistency in method is particularly demonstrable in those prophetic passages that relate to the nation of Israel, such as Jeremiah's famous New Covenant passage in Jeremiah 31:31-34. For the dispensationalist, the usage of the terms Israel and Judah indicate that the prophecy is intended to be fulfilled by and for the nation of Israel. This would be the natural, normal, and plain meaning of the terms within their contexts.

For the historic premillennialist, though, the text requires no such thing. Because the New Testament reinterprets the Old, in their view, this passage and others are easily explained away as being spiritually fulfilled in the Church rather than finding a literal fulfillment in the nation of Israel.

In his chapter in *The Meaning of the Millennium*, Ladd rightly introduces this New Covenant passage: "In Jeremiah 31 the prophet foresees a day when God will make a new covenant with rebellious Israel."²⁴ He continues with a very subtle shift in his referent: "This new covenant will be characterized by a new work of God in the hearts of his people."²⁵ Both of these are true statements with which any dispensationalist could potentially agree. However, Ladd has made a change in his second sentence from "Israel" to "his people." This is not just for literary effect.

²⁴ Ladd, "Historic Premillennialism," 25.

²⁵ Ladd, "Historic Premillennialism," 25.

He explains this change as he moves to Hebrews 8, where the New Covenant is described with Christ as mediator. As he expounds on the new covenant from this chapter, he says, “It seems impossible to avoid the conclusion that this quotation refers to the new covenant with the people of God—the Christian church—the new covenant which has been made possible because of the sacrifice of Christ.”²⁶ He has illustrated what Lawrence earlier described—the New Testament text recasting the meaning of an Old Testament prophecy.

Consistent with historic premillennialism’s inconsistent hermeneutical method, Ladd has reinterpreted the Old Testament passage to mean that which it does not say. The verses in question, Jeremiah 31:31-34 are clearly about the nation of Israel. “Israel” is mentioned specifically by name two times in these 4 verses; “Judah” once. Moreover, Jeremiah speaks of Yahweh having led this people to whom he refers out of the land of Egypt. There can be no other referent here than the literal, physical, historical, sociopolitical nation of Israel.

Not once in his discussion does Ladd dispute what the text *says*. Rather, he looks to the New Testament to reinterpret—that is, fundamentally alter the meaning of—the Old Testament text. He brings the New Testament to bear on the Old Testament in such a way that he disputes what is *meant by what is said* and changes the clear natural reading of the text to a spiritualized interpretation. With the principle of reinterpreting the Old Testament through the lens of the New Testament, Ladd announces that Israel and Judah in Jeremiah 31, in fact, now mean “church.” Grudem concurs: “The new covenant in Christ...fulfills the promises made in Jeremiah 31:31-34, as quoted in Hebrews 8.”²⁷

²⁶ Ladd, “Historic Premillennialism,” 26.

²⁷ Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 521.

The meaning ascribed by Ladd to Jeremiah 31:31-34 is not that of a fulfilled prophecy, or any kind of literal interpretation. The text not *explained* by historic premillennialism, but rather is *explained away* in favor of a meaning that is both less than and different from what the Lord revealed through his prophet. Ladd would argue that the Old Testament text must be reinterpreted through the lens of Hebrews 8 and other New Testament passages, but his reinterpretation falls far short of exegeting what the text *actually says*.

THE NEW COVENANT IN DISPENSATIONAL PREMILLENNIALISM: JEREMIAH 31:31-34

THE IMPORTANCE OF CONTEXT

Part of the reason the New Covenant is misunderstood by historic premillennialists is that they fail to properly account for the context in which Jeremiah originally prophesied. Ignoring the context as well as the details of the prophecy opens up an entire realm of spiritualized interpretation that misses the authorial intent.

A significant feature of the literal hermeneutic of Dispensationalism is to fully account for the context of a passage. Context in this usage means much more than its common misuse as merely the few verses prior and subsequent to the passage in view. It means that all elements of the historical, theological, social, literary and linguistic elements must be brought to bear on the final exegesis of the passage. Without submitting ourselves to these factors, we cannot and will not arrive at authorial intent.

As relates to an understanding of Jeremiah 31:31-34, the exegete must see the New Covenant in context with the other biblical covenants. The covenant theologian would attempt to ground

the New Covenant within the covenants of redemption, work, and grace, but this would be to put the cart before the horse. The three covenants of covenant theology are not, as has been clearly argued elsewhere²⁸, found by carefully exegeting scriptural texts. Rather, they are constructs imposed upon the text by inference and assumption.

The Adamic and Noahic Covenants

To put the New Covenant in context with other biblical covenants is to look at the covenants which are specifically and explicitly addressed and explained in the biblical text. The first covenant found would be the Adamic covenant found in Genesis 3. As God responds to the sin of Adam and Eve, he promises that her seed would one day crush the head of the serpent. This is commonly understood as being a reference to the coming of Christ centuries later.

The next covenant God makes with humanity is found in Genesis 8:20-9:17. This covenant, signified by the rainbow in the clouds, contains God's promise to Noah and his family to never again flood the entire earth in judgment. It also contains a requirement for capital punishment for murderers. Neither the Adamic nor the Noahic covenants have any requirement upon mankind to get God to fulfill his promises. Rather, they are unconditional or unilateral covenants in which God promises what he will or will not do, irrespective of Adam's or Noah's obedience.

The Abrahamic Covenant

This pattern of unilateral covenants continues with God's covenant with Abram in Genesis 12:1-3. This same covenant is developed further with Abram in Genesis 15 and with Abraham in Genesis 17. In this covenant, God has unconditionally elected Abraham to be the progenitor of

²⁸ See, for example, James Showers, "The Facts and Flaws of Covenant Theology," n.p. [cited 29 November 2015]. Online: <http://www.foi.org/free-resources/series/facts-and-flaws-covenant-theology/>.

the One who would ultimately fulfill the prior covenants with Adam, Noah, Abraham in addition to the subsequent covenants with Moses and David.

God's covenant with Abraham is foundational for understanding not just the rest of the Old Testament, but the New Testament as well. As the Old Testament moves toward the incarnation of Christ and his death and resurrection, so the New Testament interprets the first coming of Christ as it continues to move God's story along toward the rapture, millennium and ultimately the eternal state. Therefore the election of Abraham's line to be the family through whom Christ would come forms the foundation for all covenants to come.

In the Abrahamic covenant, there are three primary promises which form the core of God's covenant with Abraham, and which will be filled in later history: promises of land, seed, and blessing.

The Promise of Land

As God calls Abram out of Ur, he calls him "to the land that I will show you" (Gen. 12:1). Later in chapter 15, he delineates this land for him as extending "from the river of Egypt to the great river, the river Euphrates, the land of the Kenites, the Kenizzites, the Kadmonites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Rephaim, the Amorites, the Canannites, the Gergashites and the Jebusites" (Gen. 15:18-21). Moreover, this land is promised not just to Abram, but also to his descendents as a permanent inheritance: "And I will give to you and to your offspring after you the land of your sojourning, all the land of Canaan for an everlasting possession, and I will be their God" (Gen. 17:8).

Walvoord summarizes:

The promise of possession of the land by the seed of Abraham is a prominent feature of the

covenant, and the way the promise is given enhances its significance. The promise as given emphasizes that (1) it is gracious in its principle; (2) the land is an inheritance of the seed; (3) its title is given forever; (4) the land is to be possessed forever; (5) the land promised includes specific territory defined by boundaries. It is difficult to imagine how God could have made it clearer that the covenant was sure of its literal fulfillment.²⁹

The Promise of Seed

The promises of God to Abram are made that much more wonderful by the fact that God was making promises to the descendents of an elderly couple who had no children. Repeatedly, God promises the land, national greatness, and abundance of number to the descendents of Abraham. They will be as uncountable as the stars (Gen. 15:5) and will not die out (Gen. 17:7).

These promises are all made to the literal, physical descendents of Abraham. Both Eliezer of Damascus (Gen. 15:2) and Ishmael (Gen. 17:18-20) are excluded from being the direct inheritors of the blessing by virtue of not being the physical and literal offspring of Abraham and Sarah. They are blessed by God by virtue of their connection to Abraham, but because they are not the child(ren) of promise, they cannot, according to God, be the fulfillment of this promise.

The Promise of Blessing

“I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed” (Gen. 12:3). The promises of land and seed relate specifically to the physical descendents of Abraham through Isaac. Here, God is promising to

²⁹ John F. Walvoord, *The Millennial Kingdom*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1959), 175.

bring blessing to the Gentiles through Abraham's line. "It is anticipated that the seed should be a channel of this blessing. In particular this is fulfilled in and through the Lord Jesus Christ."³⁰

Therefore, a literal interpretation of God's promises to Abraham will look for fulfillment that includes literal, physical descendants of Abraham and Sarah through the line of Isaac possessing and enjoying the land delineated above. Moreover, there will be blessing for the earth through them.

The Mosaic Covenant

The Mosaic Covenant provides the conditional means by which the inaugurated blessings of the Abrahamic Covenant are to be enjoyed by the physical descendants of Abraham in the physical land of promise. The core of the covenant is found in Exodus 34:10-28, although it is also developed throughout the remainder of the Pentateuch.

Here, God promises to establish the nation of Israel in the land promised to Abraham by driving out the current inhabitants (Ex. 34:11). However, the success of this is predicated upon the obedience of the people to avoid aligning themselves with those people. Unlike the previous covenants, there is a strong conditional element to the Mosaic covenant. Should the nation of Israel fail to obey the requirements, they will no longer enjoy the possession of the Promised land. This is explicitly described in Deut. 29:28: "...the LORD uprooted them from their land in anger and fury and great wrath."

However, the New Covenant is foreshadowed here, as their repentance will once again bring them back to the land, and they will be dedicated to the Lord: "And the LORD your God will bring you into the land that your fathers possessed that you may possess it. And he will make

³⁰ Walvoord, *Kingdom*, 141.

you more prosperous and numerous than your fathers .And the LORD your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your offspring, so that you will love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul, that you may live” (Deut. 30:5-6). The possession of the land and the committed hearts of the nation are primary features of the New Covenant as prophesied by Jeremiah.

The Davidic Covenant

The Davidic Covenant, found in 2 Samuel 7:4-17 is a further development of the seed promise of the Abrahamic Covenant. The promise that the seed of Abraham will become a “great nation” is further specified here as a descendent from David who will reign over the physical descendents of Abraham. Though not mentioned in the four verses discussed below, it should be pointed out that this seed of David is mentioned in the near context and in the same book section in Jeremiah 30:9.

THE NEW COVENANT IN JEREMIAH 31:31-34

With the background of the prior covenants, and particularly the Abrahamic and Davidic Covenants, the New Covenant can be properly seen as making provision for their ultimate fulfillment. Therefore, we should expect to see references to literal, physical descendants as well as to literal, physical geography alongside blessing for all nations. Not only that, we should expect their meaning and fulfillment to also be met in literal and physical ways.

Jeremiah 30-33 is quickly seen to be a unit by the careful reader and is often called “The Book of Comfort.”³¹ References to the physical descendents of Abraham in the socio-political nations of Israel and Judah could not be made more plain. Right from the beginning of this

³¹ Homer Heater Jr., “Notes on the Book of Jeremiah,” n.p. [cited 28 November 2015]. Online: <https://bible.org/seriespage/7-jeremiah>.

prophecy, it is written, “‘For behold, days are coming,’ declares the LORD, ‘when I will restore the fortunes of my people, Israel and Judah,’ says the LORD, ‘and I will bring them back to the land that I gave their fathers, and they shall take possession of it’” (Jeremiah 30:3).³²

Over the next four chapters, God mentions Israel and/or Judah specifically by name more than 20 times. Jacob, King David, Rachel, Zion, and Ephraim are also mentioned. Moreover, there are specific geographic references throughout these 4 chapters. To see anything here other than prophecies specifically relating to the physical nation of Israel and the physical descendants of Abraham is to ignore the context and details and to superimpose artificial meaning divorced from the text itself.

The covenant itself is to be in contrast with the Mosaic covenant (Jer. 31:32). Unlike the Mosaic covenant, however, this will be unilateral and unconditional. It is not predicated upon the obedience of Abraham’s descendants, but upon the faithfulness of God (Jer. 31:33). And when it is fulfilled, there will be full forgiveness and relationship for the people (Jer. 31:34).

Once again God will lead the nation of Israel into the land they were promised. The promises to Abraham, in which his descendants would enjoy and possess forever the land promised will find their fulfillment in the New Covenant. The fulfillment to these promises is still future, and will be honored in the millennial kingdom.

THE NEW COVENANT IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

The New Testament application of the New Covenant to the church is a debated topic within dispensationalism.³³ “Either Christ mediates the actual new covenant of Jeremiah 31 to

³² The language here echoes that of Deuteronomy 30:5, quoted previously.

believers, or he mediates blessings of the new covenant to church believers today.”³⁴ This demonstrates that even when using a consistently literal hermeneutic, there is room for variation in understanding, and a healthy debate is proper and helpful for understanding the text better. Where there is consensus in dispensational theology is in the recognition that the prophet means Israel when he refers to Israel in Jeremiah 31:31-34.

Key to applying literal hermeneutics to the Old Testament is understanding that the Scriptures will never be truly and finally fulfilled with less than what was said or by different events than are foretold. If Jeremiah’s prophecy of the New Covenant includes the nations of Israel being gathered back into her land, then the final fulfillment must include a literal Israel back in the literal land of promise. “[W]hen the eschatological New Covenant is realized, it will have some type of exodus motif or re-gathering into the land... The direct addressees who are Israel and Judah must be re-gathered into the Promised Land.”³⁵

Gonzales argues convincingly that the writer of Hebrews is not stating that the New Covenant has been completely fulfilled and therefore must be reinterpreted.³⁶ Rather than writing of a fulfillment that exhausts the intentions of the prophecy, the writer is referring to a typological fulfillment that must also be fulfilled literally. “The Old and New Covenants are applied to the church through this soteriological grid, rather than through the political and physical land aspects of the covenant.”³⁷ New Testament believers are recipients of the blessings of salvation that come through the New Covenant, but the New Covenant will not be directly

³³ For one overview, see Mike Stallard ed., *Dispensational Understanding of the New Covenant*, (Schaumburg: Regular Baptist Books, 2012).

³⁴ Mappes and House, “Traditional Dispensational Premillennialism,” 14-15.

³⁵ Alexander R. Gonzales, “The Significance of the New Covenant in the New Testament,” in House and Weiland, *Biblical Hermeneutics*, 313.

³⁶ Gonzales, “Significance,” 329-333.

³⁷ Gonzales, “Significance,” 330.

fulfilled until the nation of Israel has seen the promises of Jeremiah 31 and other passages literally and physically come to pass.

Alexander is equally clear:

When [Hebrews 8:6-13 is] compared with the prophecies of...Jeremiah 31:33-34...it becomes evident that the New Covenant was instituted with the death of Christ on the cross and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit in Acts 2. The full appropriation of the New Covenant by the nation of Israel is still future, as argued by Jeremiah 31...Israel's restored covenant relationship with Yahweh at the 'end of days' is part of the promised blessing of the New Covenant.³⁸

CONCLUSION

The dispensationalist is such because he has consistently practiced literal interpretation. The historic premillennialist is such because he has practiced different interpretation methods for different biblical passages. He sees a literal hermeneutic required in Revelation 20 that leads him to a premillennial view, but practices symbolic and allegorical hermeneutics in other passages that lead him to a confusion of Israel and the Church.

³⁸ Ralph H. Alexander, "A New Covenant—An Eternal People (Jeremiah 31)," in *Israel: The Land and the People: An Evangelical Affirmation of God's Promises*, (ed. H. Wayne House: Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1998), 197-198.

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