THE HERMENEUTICS OF ESCHATOLOGY:
PRETERISM AND DISPENSATIONALISM COMPARED

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Eschatological Views

There are four principle views of eschatology within orthodox Christianity. One view has

it that most eschatological prophecy was fulfilled primarily in the past (Preterism), another that it

is being fulfilled throughout history in either a linear or recurring fashion (Historicism and

Idealism respectively), and finally there is the view that it awaits fulfillment in the future

(Futurism).[1] Two of the more popular views, Preterism and Futurism, have entered the spotlight

recently fostering several multi-view books and online debate forums pitting the two against

each other. The Preterist sees specific fulfillment of many "end time" events in the siege and

subsequent destruction of Jerusalem and the temple by A.D. 70.[2] The Futurist regards Revelation

as referring to events that will occur just prior to the end of the world, and thus are located not

only in the author's future, but the church's as well.[3] As should be expected, one's hermeneutic

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[1]To these can be added three millennial views: (1) Premillennialism, (2) Amillennialism, and (3) Postmillennialism. These three, while often more determinative of one's overall outlook on the past, present, and future state of the church, rely much more on their explanation of Revelation chapter twenty for their view. The interpretive practices compared in this paper are similar with regard to their arguments both pro and con.

[2]Steve Gregg, *Revelation: Four Views, A Parallel Commentary* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1997), 39. There is a further distinction within Preterism that should be noted. *Partial Preterism* sees the events of the Olivet Discourse as well as most of the book of Revelation fulfilled by A.D. 70, while *Full Preterism* holds that all prophecy (including the resurrection of the dead, the return of Christ, and the creation of the New Heavens and New Earth) was fulfilled by A.D. 70.

[3]Ibid., 40.

will greatly affect how one views the events and their fulfillment. While a methodical overview of the main interpretive strategies of each view would be valuable, this paper will focus only on the two reaching the most disparate conclusions – Preterism and Futurism.[4] As being the most diverse with regard to their beliefs about the fulfillment of eschatological prophecy, one might expect them to hold to the two most diverse hermeneutical methods; yet as this paper hopes to demonstrate this may not be the case.

Popular Hermeneutical Claims

John Walvoord says that eschatology "more than any other major field of theology has suffered at the hands of its interpreters. Even among those whose confidence in the inspired Word of God is unquestioned there exist widely divergent schools of interpretation."[5] Proponents of each view have engaged in rigorous debate both live and in print, and the interpretive practice of the other is often the subject of attack. This study will examine the hermeneutical methodology of variant exegetes, and attempt to discover where the differences lie, and what their effect is upon interpretation.

While most interpreters devote some space in their writings to a consideration of exegetical methodology, in many cases the issue is simply glossed over with popular hermeneutical slogans and the interpreter's view is then asserted as being the inexorable result of said system. For example, in the opening lines of a chapter titled "Unveiling the Future" one author writes, "Come to this book [Revelation] with an innocent approach–no preconceived

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[4]Dispensationalism adds premillennialism and the pretribulation rapture to basic Futurism. As it is with Dispensational authors that I will primarily interact I will use the two terms interchangeably unless these specifics demand otherwise.

[5]John F. Walvoord, foreword to J. Dwight Pentecost, *Things To Come: A Study in Biblical Eschatology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1958), ix.

ideas. . . . Simply see what the text is saying. Let the Word speak for itself."[6] Another author

suggests that readers should simply "let the Scriptures speak," to follow "the plain sense of

Scripture," and to seek the "plain, ordinary meaning" of Scripture to arrive at the correct

interpretation.[7] Some commentators, such as Robert Thomas, simply label all opposing

eschatological views as being the result of allegorical methodology.[8] John Walvoord strikes a

similar chord when he writes, "[Revelation] could be easily understood if interpreted in its

natural way."[9] Robert Van Kampen, in his book *The Rapture Question Answered Plain and*

Simple, gives several good examples of these kinds of statements such as calling his system a

"face value hermeneutic" that avoids "a kind of God-complex" by changing "the obvious

meaning [in]to something less obvious."[10]

But is it as simple as that? Are these hermeneutical systems really so different that such

diametrically opposed positions are the inevitable result? The following is a summary of each

system's methodology culled from the writings of its more popular proponents.[11]

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[6]Kay and David Arthur, Behold, Jesus is Coming! (Eugene, OR: Harvest House: 1995), 17. Note that the chapter title itself rejects 75% of the possible interpretations of Revelation from the start.

[7]Tim LaHaye, *No Fear of the Storm* (Sisters, OR: Multnomah, 1992), 215, 77, 219 respectively. LaHaye's book is rife with these sorts of generalizations (see esp. 197, 202, 235, 239-42).

[8]Robert L. Thomas, *Evangelical Hermeneutics: The New Versus the Old* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2002), 338.

[9]John Walvoord, End Times (Nashville: Word Publishing, 1998), 10.

[10]Robert Van Kampen, *The Rapture Question Answered Plain and Simple* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1997), 24.

[11]It would be unfair to choose only one author to represent each of view, but a high degree of comprehensiveness would be well beyond the scope of this writing. The representatives chosen are considered spokesmen for their view by others within their field, and none have been chosen that exhibit tremendous disparity with other adherents.

Literal over Allegorical

Charles Ryrie, in his landmark book *Dispensationalism,* writes, "[Dispensational Futurism] is built on a consistent use of the literal, normal, or plain method of interpretation without the addition of any other principle . . . Classical Dispensationalism is a result of consistent application of the basic hermeneutical principle of literal, normal, or plain interpretation. No other system of theology can claim this."[12] J. Dwight Pentecost claims that "the observance of these sound rules of prophetic interpretation [literal, grammatical, historical, etc.] will lead one into a correct [i.e., Futuristic] interpretation of the Scriptures."[13] Walvoord writes that "if a person does not interpret the plain statements of prophecy literally, there is no rule by which any consensus of meaning can be established; the existence of a wide diversity of interpretations shows the failure of this approach."[14] Tim LaHaye, author of over a dozen books on the subject including *The Prophecy Study Bible*, and co-founder of the Pre-Trib Research Center, optimistically believes that "prophecy is just not that difficult. Anyone can understand the major events of Bible prophecy if they spend a little time comparing Scripture with Scripture and if they avoid the temptation to spiritualize . . ."[15]

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[12]Charles Ryrie, *Dispensationalism* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1995), 85.

[13]J. Dwight Pentecost, *Things To Come,* 64.

[14]John F. Walvoord, *End Times: Understanding Today's World Events in Biblical Prophecy* (Nashville: Word Publishing, 1998), 10.

[15]Tim LaHaye and Jerry B. Jenkins, *Are We Living in the End Times?* (Wheaton, Ill:: Tyndale House Publishers, 1999) 5. It also is interesting to note that in his popular end times fictional saga *Left Behind* (Tim LaHaye, Jerry Jenkins, *Left Behind: A Novel of the Earth's Last Days* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House, 1995), that although written at (perhaps) the high school grade level, LaHaye and Jenkins feel the need to include a character (Chaim Rosenzweig) whose role it is to explain upcoming prophetic events to the other tribulation force members throughout the novels (as if the author's interpretations were so innovative that a "plain sense"

Noting that "no question facing the student of eschatology is more important than the question of the method to be employed in the interpretation of prophetic Scriptures,"[16] Pentecost devotes the first 64 pages of his eschatological tome *Things To Come* to the hermeneutical principles employed by various interpreters of prophetic Scripture.[17] He states that the primary difference between his and all other prophetic perspectives is "hermeneutical, arising from the adoption of divergent and irreconcilable methods of interpretation."[18]

The usual label to affix to these irreconcilable methods is *allegorical*. Pentecost defines the Allegorical Method as "the method of interpreting a literary text that regards the literal sense as the vehicle for a secondary, more spiritual and more profound sense."[19] He sees this method as attempting to "pervert the true meaning of Scripture" rather than to interpret it.[20] The great danger with this method is that "the basic authority in interpretation ceases to be the Scriptures, but the mind of the interpreter."[21] Futurists state that the allegorical method leaves one dependant upon his own prior theological presuppositions, intellectual training, or mystical perception. If the allegorical method is proper to interpretation of Scripture then there would exist no authority

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understanding of Revelation still could not be apprehended by the characters–and by extension the readers–after all that time).

[16]Pentecost, *Things To Come*, 1.

[17]Like most of the Futurists referred to in this paper, Pentecost is a Dispensationalist (Pre-Tribulation, Premillennial).

[18]Pentecost, *Things To Come,* 1.

[19]Bernard Ramm, *Protestant Biblical Interpretation* (Boston: W. A. Wilde Company, 1950) 1; quoted in Pentecost, *Things To Come,* 4. This technical sense, however, is often overlooked by commentators who will assign anything less than completely literal interpretation to the category of allegory.

[20]Pentecost, *Things To Come,* 5.

[21]Ibid.

outside the mind of the interpreter.[22] George Peters is not so reserved when he writes, ". . . where a literal construction will stand, the furthest from the letter is commonly the worst. There is nothing more dangerous than this licentious and deluding art, which changes the meaning of words . . . making anything what it pleases, and bringing in the end all truth to nothing."[23] He concludes that "the only true standard of interpretation is the grammatical (aided by the historical)."[24]

In contradistinction to the allegorical method, Futurists suggest the Literal (or *grammatical-historical*) method. Merrill Tenney writes, "the futurist school of thought, because of its insistence upon an interpretation as literal as possible, has been a healthy antidote to an overbalanced symbolism that has tended to make Revelation mean everything except the obvious."[25] This method involves giving each word "the same exact basic meaning it would have in normal, ordinary, customary usage, whether employed in writing, speaking or thinking."[26] Pentecost lists several reasons for adopting such a method: (1) it is the normal approach in all languages, (2) all secondary meanings depend on the literal meaning, (3) the greater part of the Bible makes sense when taken literally, (4) it will take the secondary meaning when demanded, (5) it is the only "sane and safe check on the imagination of man," (6) it is the only one in line with the nature of inspiration.[27]

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[22]Ibid., 12.

[23]George N. H. Peters, *The Theocratic Kingdom,* vol. 1 (New York: Funk & Wagnall's, 1884; reprint, Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1972), 47.

[24]Ibid., 49.

[25]Merrill Tenney, *Interpreting Revelation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1973), 145.

[26]Pentecost, *Things To Come,* 9.

[27]Ibid., 10.

Pentecost says that Scripture is also to be interpreted in normal fashion according to the rules of the original language. He favorably quotes Milton Terry when he affirms that "a new language was not made for the authors of Scripture; they conformed to the current language of the country and time."[28] From this and the above paragraph it can be seen why Pentecost's method is often referred to as the *grammatical-historical* method.

Contextual Keys

While Pentecost may be right when he states that "there is no lack of lists of rules to guide us in the interpretation of prophecy,"[29] he nevertheless sums up the interpretive principles of Futurism succinctly when he states, "the interpretation of prophecy requires attention to the same considerations in regard to words, context, grammar, and historical situations that are the accepted principles in respect to any field of interpretation."[30] He quotes Milton Terry who writes, "while duly appreciating the peculiarities of prophecy, we nevertheless must employ in its interpretation essentially the same great principles as in the interpretations of other ancient writings."[31] Terry goes on to say that "first we should ascertain the historical position of the prophet; next the scope and plan of his book; then the usage and import of his words and symbols; and, finally, ample and discriminating comparison of the parallel Scriptures should be

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[28]Milton S. Terry, *Biblical Hermeneutics*, 73; quoted in Pentecost, *Things To Come,* 38.

[29]Pentecost, *Things to Come,* 59.

[30]Ibid.

[31]Milton S. Terry, *Biblical Hermeneutics*, 2nd (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1974) 418; cited in Pentecost, *Things to Come*, 59.

made." [32] Pentecost agrees with Ramm who says, "Take the literal interpretation of prophecy as the limiting guide in prophetic interpretation."[33]

Scriptural Comparison

The basic methodology suggested by Pentecost is that words are to be interpreted according to their common meaning unless the sentence demands otherwise due to inconsistency, context, or other parts of Scripture. These meanings will be discovered by their context in the sentence, the paragraph, even the whole book or the Bible itself. Further, the context must fit the historical situation of the writing. He states, "he [the exegete] will have to transfer himself mentally into the first century A. D. . . He must place himself on the standpoint of the author, and seek to enter into his very soul, until he, as it were, lives his life and thinks his thoughts." This is in order to "guard carefully against the rather common mistake of transferring the author to the present day and making him speak the language of the twentieth century."[34]

Tenney acknowledges the symbolic nature of some prophecy. Indeed the book of Revelation is (following his interpretation?) symbolic according to its own introduction.[35] He gives several helpful means of dealing with these symbols, such as looking for explanations in the same passages, looking to the Old Testament usage, and seeing how the symbols are used elsewhere in apocalyptic literature.[36] Pentecost, acknowledging that prophetic Scriptures

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[32]Terry, *Biblical Hermeneutics,* 418.

[33]Bernard Ramm, *Protestant Biblical Interpretation,* 163-73; quoted in Pentecost, *Things To Come,* 59-60.

[34]Ibid., 37.

[35]Tenney, *Interpreting Revelation,* 186-87.

[36]Ibid. (Of course that is assuming that Revelation is correctly understood to be apocalyptic in genre).

frequently make use of figurative language and that interpretations are necessary (which he calls a "major problem"), first deals with the issue of discerning when a given passage is to be understood figuratively.[37] He sums up his view in this statement: "If the literal meaning of any word or expression makes good sense in its connections, it is literal; but if the literal meaning does not make good sense, it is figurative."[38] Thus, the interpreter is to "proceed on the presupposition that the word is literal unless there is a good reason for deciding otherwise."[39]

Pentecost states emphatically that "no prophecy which has been completely fulfilled has been fulfilled any way but literally."[40] Thus, there is no *a priori* reason to take any prophetic passage figuratively. Yet Pentecost recognizes that oftentimes prophecy is related through symbols.[41] He again quotes Terry when discussing how these symbols are to be interpreted: "the interpreter must have strict regard (1) to the historical standpoint of the writer or prophet, (2) to the scope and context, and (3) to the analogy and import of similar symbols and figures elsewhere used."[42] Pentecost adds that "one observation that seems to have been overlooked by many students of the interpretation of prophecy . . . is the fact that Scripture interprets its own symbols."[43] Feinberg notes, "[when] the symbols are explained in the immediate context, in the

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[37]Pentecost, *Things To Come,* 39.

[38]Ibid., 40.

[39]Ibid.

[40]Ibid.,10-11.

[41]Ibid., 53.

[42]Terry, *Biblical Hermeneutics,* 356-57 as cited in Pentecost, *Things to Come,* 53-54.

[43]Pentecost, *Things to Come*, 55.

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book in which they occur, or elsewhere in the Word, no room [is] left to the imaginations of man to devise explanations."[44]

Preterism's Hermeneutical System

Literal over Allegorical

With Preterism's radically different understanding of end time prophecy it would not be surprising to discover an equally radical difference in its hermeneutical strategy. Yet Gary DeMar, in his discussion of the Preterist view of interpretation, makes several familiar sounding assertions. For example, he blames Futurists for rejecting the literal approach when interpreting the "time texts" and for substituting their plain interpretation with the doctrine of *imminency*.[45] This objection reveals one of the most important aspects of Preterism's hermeneutical claim – the literal understanding of timing texts. After listing over forty passages referring to eschatological events that use "soon fulfillment" language, DeMar states, "the biblical writers are straightforward in their claim that the events described were to happen 'soon' for those who first read the prophecies. No other interpretation is possible if the words are taken in their 'plain, primary, ordinary, usual, or normal' sense."[46]

This challenge should sound familiar. He concludes that "there is no getting around this language . . . . Forcing the verses to describe a time nearly two thousand years in the future is the

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[44]Charles L. Feinberg, *Premillennialism or Amillennialism* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1936), 37; cited in Pentecost, *Things to Come*, 55.

[45]Gary DeMar, *Last Days Madness: Obsession of the Modern Church*, 3d ed. (Powder Springs, GA: American Vision, 1997), 30.

[46]Ibid., 31.

epitome of 'Scripture twisting.'"[47] Chilton summarizes the problem well: "It might be answered that one man's 'plain sense' is another man's 'speculation.'"[48]

James Russell makes similar complaints regarding any understanding of prophecy that ignores time limitations: "Yet, in the face of these express and oft-neglected declarations, most interpreters have felt at liberty to ignore the limitations of time altogether, . . . To neglect the obvious and clear definition of time so constantly thrust on the attention of the reader by the book itself is to stumble on the very threshold."[49] He also states that when understanding a given symbol that its underlying reality is to be taken literally: "the historical facts underlying these symbols are sufficiently real and tangible."[50] He concludes his argument for a first century coming of Christ with these words: "The plain grammatical meaning of these statements [Mt. 10:23; 16:28; and 24:34] has been fully discussed. No violence can extort from them any other sense than the obvious and unambiguous one, viz. that our lord's second coming would take place within the limits of the existing generation."[51]

R. C. Sproul says of Russel's hermeneutic that it reflects a "first-glance reading of the text that is held by Russell and others."[52] He goes on: "If both 'this generation' and 'all these

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[47]DeMar, *Last Days,* 27.

[48]David Chilton, *The Days of Vengeance: An Exposition on the Book of Revelation* (Ft. Worth, TX: Dominion Press, 1987), 38. See his whole discussion of this issue 27-38.

[49]James S. Russell, *The Parousia: A Critical Inquiry into The New Testament Doctrine of Our Lord's Second Coming* (London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1887; reprint, Bradford, Penn.: The International Preterist Association, 2003), 367 (page citations are to the reprint edition).

[50]Ibid., 399.

[51]Ibid., 540-41.

[52]R. C. Sproul, *The Last Days According to Jesus* (Grand Rapids, MI.: Baker Books, 1998), 17.

things' are taken at face value, then either all the content of Jesus' Olivet Discourse, including the parousia he describes here, have already taken place (in some sense), or at least some of Jesus' prophecy failed to take place within the time-frame assigned to it."[53] He follows this observation up with a discussion of hermeneutics. Although he agrees with Luther's *sensus literalis* he qualifies that approach: "To take every text 'literally' in this sense [woodenly literal] is not to interpret it according to the genre in which it was written, but to interpret it in a plain indicative sense."[54]

Contextual Keys

These are not the only familiar-sounding arguments against the opposing hermeneutic. Preterists also focus on context when dealing with interpretation. In commentaries on the Olivet Discourse, Preterists are usually careful to point out the fact that Jesus is responding to questions relating to the destruction of the temple that Jesus and the disciples had exited only moments ago – not some future temple.[55] Further, in Jesus' answer (the discourse itself), He continually refers to "you" (i.e., the disciples), not to Christians in general, or some future generation, and thus locates the fulfillment of the prophecy in the disciple's time.[56]

As to the identity of "this generation" in Mt. 24:34, Preterists cite both near and far contextual usage when they point out that Jesus Himself defined "this generation" in the near context of chapter 23, not to mention the other uses of the same phrase elsewhere in the New

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[53]Ibid., 64-65.

[54]Ibid., 66.

[55]Russell, *The Parousia,* 42-43.

[56]Ibid., 74.

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Testament.[57] David Chilton chides Futurists who attempt to ignore the "clear" use of the phrase by interpreting inconsistently: "[the phrase 'this generation'] always refers to *contemporaries. . . . In fact, those who say it means 'race' tend to acknowledge this fact, but explain that the word suddenly changes its meaning when Jesus uses it in Matthew 24!"[emphasis in original].[58]

Edward Stevens likewise calls interpreters to a contextual understanding of Scripture. Writing on the possibility of a "rapture" in the first century he instructs readers to "look at the text carefully. Let's not read into it what we want to be there. Follow closely what the text actually says. . . . There is no need to twist the text in order to avoid the rapture position. . . . let's not torture the text by trying to make it say something that the context does not support."[59]

Kenneth Gentry likewise attacks some popular proponents of Dispensationalism with regard to their lack of restraint when it comes to interpreting some symbols. He argues that there are contextually available limiting factors for understanding an authors' meaning. In *The Beast of Revelation* he takes specific issue with many guesses at the solution to the number of the beast: "As is evident from the history of the interpretation of 666, we certainly do need something to confine our thinking to the realm of the reasonable!"[60] He then lists what he sees as several contextual limiters (such as the number being that of a contemporary man with great authority)

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[57]Ibid., 68-74.

[58]David Chilton, *The Great Tribulation* (Ft. Worth, TX: Dominion Press, 1987), 3; quoted in DeMar, *Last Days,* 73-74.

[59]Edward Stevens, *Expectations Demand a First Century Rapture* (Bradford, Penn.: International Preterist Association, 2003), 113.

[60]Kenneth Gentry, *The Beast of Revelation* (Tyler, TX.: Institute for Christian Economics, 1994), 9.

that would exclude many of the more popular proposed solutions (e.g. demons, political institutions, languages, or philosophical systems).[61]

Scriptural Comparison

Preterists also demand that Scripture must interpret Scripture. When dealing with the three hardest objections to the alleged first century fulfillment of the Olivet Discourse most Preterists stick very close to scriptural parallels. For example, many Futurists will argue that the gospel has not yet been preached to the whole world as promised in Mt. 24:14. Preterists do not attempt to "spiritualize" the issue but instead use Scripture to show that it had, according to Paul, been fulfilled (i.e., Col. 1:23; Rom. 1:6-8, 10:18).[62] To further help their case they cite the meaning of the Greek term translated "world" (*oikoumene*) to show that it does not necessarily refer to the planet Earth, and then go on to quote even more Scripture to back up *that* point.

Many Futurists claim the Abomination of Desolation that Jesus warns the disciples about refers to the Antichrist setting himself up in the (rebuilt) temple.[63] Since, according to futurists, this clearly has not yet taken place, and because the other events of the Olivet Discourse are tied into it, neither has the rest of the prophecy been fulfilled. Preterists do not believe that they turn this into any kind of allegory to escape the plain meaning. Instead, once again, they turn to Scripture and point out that the parallel account in Luke 21:20-21 shows that this event would occur when Jerusalem was "surrounded by armies," an event that was fulfilled in A.D. 67-68 [64]

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[61]Ibid., 10-11.

[62]DeMar, *Last Days*, 64-66.

[63]LaHaye, *End Times*, 122.

[64]DeMar, *Last Days*, 87-89. Some Dispensationalists assert that Matthew and Luke are not recording the same answer to the disciple's question, see Pentecost, *Things to Come,* 276.

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When Futurists object to a first century fulfillment based upon their literal understanding of the language of Mt. 24:29, Preterists cite many other examples of this apocalyptic language in Scripture referring to similar situations that they believe have already come to pass but not in a literalistic fashion (i.e. Ezekiel 32; Isaiah 13; Amos 8; etc.).[65] This is a far cry from "spiritualizing the text" in order to "avoid its clear meaning." Preterists then ask, if Scripture interprets Scripture, and if the original audience's understanding is really to be sought, then why make this verse mean in the New Testament what it did not in the Old Testament? Tenney notes that "symbols as a whole are not taken from fanciful or imaginary sources, but are related to ideas that would be readily recognized by the readers."[66] DeMar agrees: "The language used in Matthew 24 [:29] was familiar. The disciples had heard it before."[67] Commenting on this very passage Terry notes:

> A strictly literal interpretation of such pictorial modes of thought leads only to absurdity. . . . with what show of reason, or on what principle of 'interpreting Scripture by Scripture,' can it be maintained that the language of Isaiah, and Joel, and Daniel, allowed by all the best exegetes to be metaphorical when employed in the Hebrew Scriptures, must be literally understood when appropriated by Jesus or his apostles?
>   We sometimes, indeed, meet with a disputant who attempts to evade the force of the above question by the plea that if we interpret one part of Jesus's discourse literally we are bound in consistency to treat the entire prophecy in the same way. . . . It is difficult to

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[65]Chilton, *The Days of Vengeance*, 196.

[66]Tenney, *Interpreting Revelation,* 193.

[67]DeMar, *Last Days,* 148.

understand how such a superficial plea can be seriously put forward by one who has made a careful study of the Hebrew prophets.[68]

Sproul's words are succinct: "The strength of the preterist position is found precisely in this hermeneutical method. When faced with the option of interpreting the time-frame references literally or interpreting the description of the parousia literally, the preterist chooses the former. The preterist's choice is governed by a larger hermeneutical principle, (*analogia fide*)."[69]

Evaluation of Major Hermeneutical Differences

It seems at this point in the discussion that no clearly defined line of demarcation has been demonstrated between Futurist and Preterist hermeneutics. Both sides assert many similar principles, and both seek to apply them to many of the same Scriptures. The differences are rarely of form but of specific application. It would seem appropriate, then, to investigate the alleged distinctions more closely.

Literal vs. Figurative?

Oswald T. Allis identifies the disparity between these two systems when he writes, "it is the insistent claim of its [Premillennialism's] advocates that only when interpreted literally is the Bible interpreted truly; and they denounce as 'spiritualizers' or 'allegorizers' those who do not interpret the Bible with the same degree of literalness as they do."[70] As was previously noted, one of the prime rallying cries of Futurism's system is "literal unless obviously figurative." Now, what "obviously" means here is seldom made clear, and an objective methodology by which the

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[68]Milton S. Terry, *Biblical Apocalyptics* (New York: Eaton & Mains, 1898; reprint Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2001), 240.

[69]Sproul, *The Last Days According to Jesus*, 66. Note that many Preterists, preferring to take the whole discourse literally, would not accept this description of their view.

[70]Oswald T. Allis, *Prophecy and the Church* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1945), 17; quoted in Pentecost, *Things To Come,* 1.

interpreter may recognize these "obvious" instances are even more rare. Examples are often given of metaphors such as God having wings, as if these are the only examples of symbolism to be found. Some will add that if a thing is interpreted for the author (by an angel for instance) then that can also be interpreted as symbolic. Here again, both systems would agree. However, while discussing the presuppositions of Dispensationalists with regard to their handling of Christ's Olivet Discourse, Kenneth Gentry writes, "Walvoord and others of his school of thought are forced by their presupposition regarding the nature of language ("it must be literal unless absurd") to DISALLOW Jesus's apocalyptic-prophetic language to apply to A.D. 70" [emphasis in original].[71]

Preterism might be said to add a single caveat to the discovery and interpretation of symbolism in prophetic passages: a term or passage should be taken literally unless other Scripture warrants a symbolic understanding. They would not be alone in doing so. In *Things to Come*, Pentecost identifies the woman of Revelation chapter 12 as the nation of Israel. He does so by comparing the description of the woman with Old Testament descriptions of Israel (i.e., Jer. 31:35-36; Josh. 10:12-14; Judges 5:20; and Ps. 89:35-37). He even cites the fact that the term "she" is also used of Israel in the Old Testament.[72] Now it is important to note that *nowhere in Revelation is the woman said to be anything other than a woman* - she is not interpreted for the reader, she is not called a city or a nation. Yet, on the basis of Old Testament usage of terms a "simple and plain" understanding of this woman is not chosen.

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[71]Kenneth Gentry, *Dispensationalism in Transition.* <http://reformed-theology.org/ice/newslet/dit/dit08.98.htm> Internet [Accessed March 1, 2003].

[72]Pentecost, *Things to Come,* 287-88.

Using this same process, Chilton interprets the harlot of Revelation chapter 17 (who *is* called a city) as Jerusalem.[73] He argues this based upon the numerous parallels between the harlot's description in Revelation and Jerusalem's description throughout the Old Testament as well as the near context of Rev. 11:8 where the only other mention of a "great city" in Revelation undoubtedly refers to Jerusalem.[74] Pentecost, on the other hand, without citing a single Old Testament reference, identifies this harlot not as a city, but as "the apostate religious system, that exists in the tribulation period."[75] Once again, a "literal versus symbolic" argument here will not suffice to decide the better interpretation. In fact, Gentry uses this very argument against Thomas's view of the harlot, which he refers to as a "symbols-of-symbols methodology," when he writes, "Thomas commits another startling hermeneutical gaffe [when he argues that] analogy would dictate that the seven mountains are also symbolic and not literal hills . . . "[76]

Description:	*Jerusalem*	*Harlot*
Clothed in purple and scarlet	Ex. 28	Rev. 17:4, 18:15
Gold and precious stones	Ibid.; Isa. 54:11-12	Ibid.
A harlot	Isa. 1:21	Rev. 17:5
Great city that says she is no widow	Lam. 1:1	Rev. 17:18, 18:7-8
Lovers will strip her	Ezek. 16:37-39; Lam 1:8-9	Rev. 17:16
Mother of harlots	Ezek. 16:44-48	Rev. 17:6-7

Consistency vs. Inconsistency?

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[73]Chilton, *Days of Vengeance,* 424-32.

[74]Ibid., 281.

[75]Pentecost, *Things to Come,* 364.

[76]Kenneth L. Gentry Jr., *Before Jerusalem Fell* rev. ed. (Atlanta, GA: American Vision, 1998), xxix.

Often the charge of inconsistency will be leveled at those whose conclusions differ from one another. Thomas Ice, head of the Pre-Trib research foundation, seems to recognize the fact of similar hermeneutics between divergent views when he admits that "the grammatical-historical hermeneutic is used by all evangelicals," but he then adds the caveat: "Dispensationalists simply believe that grammatical-historical interpretation should be consistently applied."[77] Ice agreed with Walvoord when he "came to believe that when one made a consistent application of interpretive methods, exegesis of Scripture and theological thought, there were only two consistent positions: amillennialism and pretribulational premillennialism," for, "if one is going to allegorize at all, then he might as well allegorize everything . . ."[78] Again, it must be asked, are these charges justified?

Some have asked whether "consistent literalism" may not be the *sine qua non* of Futurism after all. With regard to the alleged "consistent literalism" of Futurism, Gary DeMar asks, "How consistent are dispensationalists in following the 'literal, plain, or normal' hermeneutical model when they deny the 'literal, plain, or normal' interpretation of 'near,' 'shortly,' and 'quickly'?"[79] The time gaps and double fulfillments required by Dispensationalist hermeneutics might also be included in this example.[80] To the Preterist the "plain" meaning of these terms are taken to be timing indicators, and to take them any other way is to do the very thing they are accused of doing by futurists.

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[77]Thomas Ice, *Dispensational Hermeneutics,* online: [http://www.pre-trib.org/pdf/Ice-DispensationalHermene.pdf], 13; accessed 02/10/04.

[78]Thomas Ice, "The Walvoord Legacy," *Pre-Trib Perspectives* vol. 7, no.10 (February 2003): 4.

[79]DeMar, *Last Days,* 285.

[80]For example the "Church-Age" gap in the Seventy Weeks of Daniel (Dan. 9:24-27).

Ice responds to these and similar charges by stating that Preterists are "not defining literal interpretation the way dispensational futurists do."[81] He appeals to Eliot Johnson's distinction between "macroliteral" (the overall scheme of plain interpretation) and "microliteral" (the recognition of nonliteral elements within the overall scheme), and says that Gentry confuses the two in his examples.[82] However, Preterists argue in a similar fashion that while the literal method is correct overall, decisions about any given text must be made to discern when figurative language is being used. They see interpretive consistency not in simply following a "preconceived literalism" for every verse one at a time, but also in recognizing sections of Scripture that are figurative in nature.[83]

Further, in the examples Ice gives above to illustrate microliteralism he uses only metaphysically obvious metaphors (e.g. Jesus calling Himself a door in John 10:9). But "obvious" examples such as these cannot account for every instance of disagreement over how a given passage should be understood. For instance, how does a metaphysically non-contradictory understanding of "generation" in the Olivet Discourse help either side in discovering the intended meaning of that disputed passage (Mt. 24:34)?

Gerstner gives what he sees as an example of futurist inconsistency when he asks, "Is Russia really going to use chariots and bows and arrows against the King of the South?" He goes on to note that, ". . . every time Hal Lindsey assigns modern-day weaponry [such as seeing the locusts of Revelation chapter 9 as helicopters] to Old Testament predictions, he is casting aside

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[81]Tim LaHaye and Thomas Ice, *The End Times Controversy* (Eugene: Harvest House, 2003), 72.

[82]Ibid., 69-71.

[83]See Gentry's comments in Pate, *Four Views on the Book of Revelation,* 39.

the literal canon of interpretation . . ."[84] Tenney can be seen skewing to the non-literal as well.
Just after writing, "the more literal an interpretation that one adopts, the more strongly will he be
construed to be a futurist," Tenney then gives what he apparently thinks is an example of just
such literalism: "the atom bomb, guided missiles, and the scientific devices of modern warfare
have made the Apocalypse seem much less apocalyptic than it did fifty years ago."[85] How, one
might legitimately ask, is taking a mountain to be a bomb any more literal than to understand 100
pound hail as stones used for catapult ammunition?[86] Gentry also chides Charles Ryrie for not
following his "face value hermeneutic" when he interprets Rev. 9:1-12 as UFO's.[87]

It seems that within both systems prior theological conclusions may create a tendency to
overlook inconsistency when theological conclusions have already been reached. As a less
controversial illustration, Ron Rhodes in his book, *Reasoning from the Scriptures with the
Mormons*, attacks Joseph Smith's prophetic claim by noting several of his false prophecies. One
that stands out as an obvious failure is Smith's prophecy that the building of the Mormon temple
in Missouri would occur within "*this generation*"[emphasis in original].[88] Yet in other writings,
Rhodes refutes those who use the very same argument against Jesus' claim to be a prophet due to
His use of "this generation" in the Olivet Discourse. He does this by resorting to the "race"

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[84]G. C. Miladin, *Is This Really The End?* (Cherry Hill, NJ: Mack, 1972) 11-12 quoted in
John H. Gerstner, *Wrongly Dividing the Word of Truth: A Critique of Dispensationalism*, 2nd
(Wolgemuth and Hyatt Publishers, 1991; reprint Morgan, PA: Soli Deo Gloria Publications,
2000), 94.

[85]Tenney, *Interpreting Revelation*, 142-43.

[86]See Gregg, *Four Views,* 394.

[87]Gentry Jr., *Before Jerusalem Fell*, 10.

[88] "For verily *this generation shall not all pass away* until an house shall be built unto the
Lord." *Doctrine and Covenants* 84:3-5 as cited in Ron Rhodes, *Reasoning from the Scriptures
with the Mormons* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House Publishers, 1995), 68.

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argument, or by stating that this refers to "the generation that witnesses the signs" before the end comes.[89] Why, it must be asked, is this an acceptable argument when vindicating Christ, but not when defending Joseph Smith? If this is indeed an example of the use of a consistently literal hermeneutic then the Mormons ought to be allowed to lay claim to this answer as well.

One of the larger problems with this idea of interpretive superiority through consistent methodology comes from a rather ironic source. In 1890 Milton Terry wrote *Biblical Hermeneutics*, a work so well received that it became the primary hermeneutical text of many seminary classes for years to come and is still in print today. One of the more notable schools to use *Biblical Hermeneutics* was Dallas Theological Seminary where many, if not most, of today's leading Dispensationalists received their training in biblical interpretation and eschatology. This is evidenced by the frequent positive citations of Terry in many Dispensational writings including many listed in this paper. What is rather curious about this state of affairs is that Terry was a Postmillennial Preterist and hardly favorable toward Dispensationalism.[90]

Terry is not alone in this odd category. Bernard Ramm, whose book *Protestant Biblical Interpretation* was called "the standard hermeneutics textbook of his day" by dispensationalist Thomas Ice, continues to be cited approvingly by many dispensationalists even today.[91] Mal Couch, in a polemic against Preterism, quotes Ramm approvingly several times, even stating, "It is suggested to all preterists that they read again the classic volume on allegorical interpretation, *Protestant Biblical Interpretation,* by Bernard Ramm."[92] Robert Thomas positively quoted both

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[89]Norman L. Geisler and Ron Rhodes, *When Cultists Ask: A Popular Handbook On Cultic Misinterpretations* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1997), 126-27.

[90]This is evident in many of his writings, see *Biblical Hermeneutics*, esp. 438-98.

[91]LaHaye and Ice, *The End Times Controversy*, 68-69.

[92]Mal Couch, *The Fatal Mistakes of Preterism*, Conservative Theological Society:

Terry and Ramm repeatedly throughout his book *Evangelical Hermeneutics* (which contains no less than four chapters on prophetic interpretation, one specifically targeting Preterism) to illustrate his hermeneutical position.[93] Now one might conclude from this that Ramm himself was at least somewhat favorable toward Dispensationalism. Yet Ramm believes that "people familiar with the history of interpretation and of millennial speculation know all the imponderables in the dispensational system," and therefore, "historically informed evangelicals cannot accept the fanciful projections of the future one finds in dispensationalism."[94] In light of his constant positive references from those within that very camp, it is shocking to read Ramm's conclusion that "dispensationalism's sharp division of the church and Israel, each going its own unique course through history into eternity, is a remarkable piece of theological heresy."[95]

Now, for hermeneuticians of one eschatological school to consistently cite with glowing approval two authors as standard-setters of the proper hermeneutical approach, and then to claim that the consistent use of this approach will lead one inexorably to a view of prophecy that is opposed to the views held by those authors is troublesome to say the least. Now, one could reply

<http://www.conservativeonline.org/articles/preterism/fatal_mistakes_of_preterism.htm> [Accessed February 16, 2004].

[93]Thomas, *Evangelical Hermeneutics*, passim. Similarly, Chester E. Tulga, in his "Premillennial or Amillennial? An Introductory Study," writes, "Amillennialism, without adequate Scriptural warrant and by arbitrary choice, spiritualizes many Scriptures thus forcing them to serve their theological system. Premillennialism believes that the Scriptures are to be interpreted normally as other writings, unless the language or the context clearly indicates otherwise. . . . The proper principles of interpretation have been set forth by many writers. Bernard Ramm (*Protestant Biblical Interpretation*, p.172) says, 'Interpret prophecy literally unless the evidence is such that a spiritual interpretation is mandatory, e.g., where the passage is poetic or symbolic or apocalyptic in literary form or where the New Testament evidence demands a spiritual interpretation.'" (http://www.geocities.com/Athens/Rhodes/7895/preoram.html Accessed February 16, 2004)

[94]Bernard Ramm, *After Fundamentalism* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1983), 186.

[95]Ibid.

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that these authors were inconsistent in their methodology, but the burden of proof would be on

the one making this charge to demonstrate its truth by producing non-question begging evidence.

Toward a More Realistic Dialogue Between Divergent Views: Focusing on Presuppositions

It seems that in order to move forward in this debate the constant cries of "inconsistency"

or "not taking the text in its plain sense" must be abandoned by both sides. Clearly, there is

something else going on. Tenney believes that "the error in each [view] arises from an over

extension of the truth or from an exaggeration of some one interest."[96] Michael Harbin writes,

"Scholars have allowed figures of speech as an integral part of the historical-grammatical, or

literal, method. This is true, no matter which view one takes of the interpretation of prophecy . .

."[97] As Henry Virkler has observed, "The question is not between a strictly literal versus a

strictly symbolic approach: even the strictest literalist takes some things symbolically . . .

conversely, even the most thoroughgoing symbolist interprets some things literally. Thus the

differences between literalists and symbolists are relative, rather than absolute, involving

questions of 'how much' and 'which parts' of prophecy should be interpreted symbolically rather

than literally."[98] The issue, then, is how each side determines the answer to those questions.

More than likely, theological assumptions do have some say in a given interpreter's

conclusions. Unfortunately this possibility is often denied or ignored by each side until opposing

interpretations are critiqued. Tim LaHaye believes that when conflicts arise the solution by all

non-Dispensationalists is to "elevate [their] system of theology over the Word of God in order to

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[96]Tenney, *Interpreting Revelation,* 144.

[97]Michael A. Harbin, "The Hermeneutics of Covenant Theology" Bibliotheca Sacra, Vol. 143, No. 571. 7-8.

[98]Henry A. Virkler, *Hermeneutics: Principles and Processes of Biblical Interpretation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1981), 196; quoted in ibid.

'clarify' what God is saying."[99] LaHaye apparently believes that his system of interpretation

utilizes no theological presuppositions (although he lists two primary ones in a section where he

blames theology for other interpretations).[100] Michael Harbin, in his comparison of the

hermeneutics of Dispensationalism and Covenant Theology, makes a similar, yet confusing,

assertion when he states that one's theological presuppositions may not only be influential, but

might ultimately provide the "controls" for correctly distinguishing between proper and improper

interpretation of symbols. He blames this "stopgap" measure for the errors of Covenant thought

and then reveals his conclusion that "Covenant theology is built on a weak hermeneutical base

which consists of theological constructs. . . . Conversely dispensationalism is built on the strong

hermeneutical base of literal interpretation. As such it has a strong external authority and a

consistent method. Since Scripture is the believer's authority, dispensationalism is concluded to

be a more effective hermeneutical system."[101]

While these sorts of claims are certainly not limited to Dispensationalism (as several of

the statements of Preterists quoted in this paper show), Dispensationalist authors make more

consistent claims of this sort. Many seem to think that only non-Dispensationalists have a

theology from which any influence is drawn. Gerstner's comments are fitting here: "the real

point of divergence is that dispensationalists and non-dispensationalists have different

conceptions of what constitutes a plausible interpretation. The question of what is plausible is, it

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[99]LaHaye, *No Fear*, 178.

[100]Ibid., Appendix B, esp. 239.

[101]Ibid., 14.

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should be noted, a theological rather than an interpretive question. . . . There is nothing in linguistics, *per se*, that will ever settle that question."[102]

Bernard Ramm notes that, "In reading much dispensationalist literature, one encounters claims that amount to sinless perfection in biblical interpretation. Writers of this persuasion state that they are reading the Word of God for exactly what it says, . . . The fundamentalists' belief that they read the prophetic parts of Holy Scripture with pure objectivity runs contrary to their doctrines of original sin and total depravity."[103] Gerstner similarly writes that "by a certain naïveté they [Dispensationalists] suppose that their method brings them into an immediate apprehension of Scripture as over against the 'interpretations' of others. . . . In spite of all contentions that dispensationalists are the consistent literalists, they start out in their biblical interpretation pretty much where everyone else does."[104] Gerstner's further comments are instructive:

> We *all* agree that most literature, including the *Bible*, is usually meant to be understood according to the literal construction of the words which are used. . . . There are certain parts of it which everyone, including the dispensationalist, admits are not to be construed literally. . . there is a small area of Scripture, mainly in the area of prophecy, where there is a lively debate as to whether one interprets literally or figuratively. . . . We are all literalists up to a certain point. . . .
> But to say on the basis of that limited divergence of interpretation that the two schools represent fundamentally different approaches is not warranted.[emphasis in original][105]

Ramm concludes that, "The issue among evangelical interpreters is not over the validity of grammatical or literal exegesis. . . . In fundamental theory there is no difference between

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[102]Gerstner, *Wrongly Dividing*, 97-98.

[103]Ramm, *After Fundamentalism*, 185.

[104]Gerstner, *Wrongly Dividing*, 91.

[105]Ibid., 93.

Berkof's *Principles of Biblical Hermeneutics* (amillennial) and Chafer's *The Science of Biblical Hermeneutics* (dispensational). Both agree that the grammatical, historical method is basic to understanding the Bible. Nor is the issue one of the figurative or non-figurative language of the prophets."[106]

Some of these principles may not be understood the same way by both schools, or even between interpreters within them. Two examples will be highlighted below. First, David Chilton was noted earlier as having stated that "[the phrase 'this generation'] always refers to *contemporaries. . . .* In fact, those who say it means 'race' tend to acknowledge this fact, but explain that the word suddenly changes its meaning when Jesus uses it in Matthew 24!"[emphasis in original].[107] Note that for this argument to work the terms "meaning" and "referent" must be taken equivocally. Thomas Ice seems to recognize a distinction between the two when he writes, "*Context* is the most important factor in determining the exact meaning or referent under discussion."[108] Yet DeMar ignores this distinction completely when he writes, "Every time 'this generation' is used in the New Testament, it means, without exception, the generation to whom Jesus was speaking."[109] Even if the meaning of a given term or phrase is the same in every instance of its use in the Bible (and in this case it is not), would it be legitimate to assume that the referent must also be the same? No, the fact that a phrase has the same *meaning*

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[106]Bernard Ramm, *Protestant Biblical Interpretation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1970), 243.

[107]David Chilton, *The Great Tribulation* (Ft. Worth, TX: Dominion Press, 1987), 3; quoted in DeMar, *Last Days,* 73-74.

[108]LaHaye and Ice, *End Times Controversy*, 92 [emphasis in original].

[109]Gary DeMar, *End Times Fiction* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2001), 68; in LaHaye and Ice, *End Times Controversy*, 90. Ice notes in this section that even the referent of "this generation" is not always contemporary in the New Testament (e.g. Heb. 3:10).

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in two different contexts does not necessarily mean that it has to have the same *referent* (e.g. Isa. 7:7:14 cf. Mt. 1:23). This confusion of meaning and referent is just one possible avenue to explore in one's philosophy of language.

Another might be to discover what it is that supposedly makes figurative language "obvious" to some when it is clearly not to others. Although Pentecost thinks that most figurative language is quite obvious, he gives the following guidelines to assist the interpreter: the passage should be taken literally unless (1) it is obviously figurative, (2) the New Testament authorizes the figurative sense, or (3) a literal interpretation would contradict non-figurative portions of Scripture.[110] Now, (1) and (3) will vary according to one's theology and thus are somewhat circular, and (2) would itself have to be "obviously" literal in order to avoid an infinite regress. Fairbairn gives a rare, more robust principle with regard to the "obviousness" of figurative language. He states that words are to be taken figuratively "when anything is said which if taken according to the letter would be at variance with the essential nature of the subject spoken of . . ."[111] In other words, a term is obviously figurative when it simply *cannot* be literally true of the object to which it refers (such as when Christ is referred to as a lamb or a door - a favorite example among "literalists"). This is helpful with metaphor, but will do little good with regard to genre considerations or some literary devices. In any case, these are in the category of philosophical or theological considerations, not hermeneutic.

Conclusion

As has been shown, neither system interprets either literally or figuratively in every case. The question is really one of when it is appropriate to do either. Thus, it seems that an

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[110]Pentecost, *Things To Come*, 40.

[111]Patrick Fairbairn, *Hermeneutical Manual* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1858), 138 as quoted in Pentecost, *Things To Come*, 41.

interpreter's presuppositions are affecting his hermeneutic no matter what principles he tries to follow consistently. Thus, it may not be that two truly different hermeneutic systems are involved, but rather that the presuppositions of each camp skew the way the weight they give to common principles when they come into conflict.[112]

Ethical systems are often tested using moral dilemmas (what to do when faced with comparable yet opposing moral principles), and these often form the acid test for a given system of ethics. This may be the case with the hermeneutics of eschatology. When equivalent principles conflict (such as "Scripture Should Interpret Scripture" vs. "Literal Unless Obviously Figurative") it appears that Futurists will usually take what they see as a more literal approach to "event" Scriptures (such as Mt. 24:29) and thus hold to an interpretation that finds its fulfillment in the future. Preterists, on the other hand, will usually take what they see as a more literal approach to "timing" Scriptures (such as Rev. 1:1-3), thus finding justification for a more symbolic fulfillment of the prophesied event in the past.[113] This does not prove that *actual* conflicts exist, of course. For now it is enough to point out that each camp at least appears to see themselves as following the standard literal method. Perhaps, then, the question should not be "Literal vs. Figurative?" or "Consistent vs. Inconsistent?" but rather, *"What vs. When?"* This difference in choice between co-equal principles may help to explain the discord between two views that each advocate what appear to be essentially the same general hermeneutical principles.

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[112]Harbin lists several possibilities but focuses on assumptions of purpose. See Michael A. Harbin, "The Hermeneutics of Covenant Theology," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 143, No. 571; accessed online <www.grace360.org/pdf/supplemental/2003.08.24/hermeneutics.pdf> February 17, 2004.

[113]Of course, what makes a text fall into either category is also up for debate. See LaHaye and Ice, *End Times Controversy*, 283-305.

In conclusion, the real issue here does not appear to be with completely divergent hermeneutical systems, but on how and when different aspects of a common system are to be utilized. That choice may be the result of theological or philosophical assumptions. Thus, like two trails that begin only a few feet apart and yet end on opposite sides of a mountain, it may be the case that even small variations in one's presuppositions lead to a seemingly impassable hermeneutical gulf. If this is true then further investigation should focus on the deeper presuppositions of the two schools rather than continually blaming a defective hermeneutic for their differences.

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