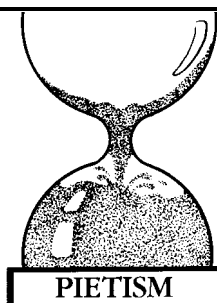


Dispensationalism in Transition

Challenging Traditional Dispensationalism's "Code of Silence"



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1988: DISPENSATIONALISM'S YEAR OF CRISIS

by Gary North

Immediately after the tribulation of those days shall the sun be darkened, and the moon shall not give her light, and the stars shall fall from heaven, and the powers of the heavens shall be shaken: And then shall appear the sign of the Son of man in heaven: and then shall all the tribes of the earth mourn, and they shall see the Son of man coming in the clouds of heaven with power and great glory (Matt. 24:29-30).

At least one of these verses obviously cannot be taken literally: ". the stars shall fall from heaven." If the stars literally fall from heaven, they have to fall down **to** somewhere. Down? What meaning does "down" have for the stars? Only one: down to earth. Does anyone today believe that whole galaxies will visibly fall down from the sky "to" somewhere, the speed of light being what it is, and the distances between galaxies being what they are? Does anyone believe they will fall to the earth? Stars are not tiny objects in the sky.

Then what does the text mean? Stars in the Bible sometimes refer to angels (Judges 5:20; Job 38:7), the "powers of the heavens." We know that Satan's angels fell from heaven after the resurrection of Jesus (Rev. 12:9). One of these "stars" is named Wormwood (Rev. 8:11). So, the word "stars" in Matthew 24:29 does not refer to flaming physical stars in the sky, but to the angels, or to some political order associated in the Old Testament with angelic hosts.

The darkening of the "sun" and "moon" is equally figurative, in both the Old and New Testaments: it refers to revolutionary changes in a political order. Isaiah prophesied concerning the fall of Babylon (Isa. 13:1) to the Medo-Persian empire:

For the stars of heaven and the constellations thereof shall not give their light: the sun shall be darkened in its going forth, and the moon shall not cause her light to shine. And I will punish the world for their evil, and the wicked for their iniquity; and I will cause the arrogance of the proud to cease, and will lay low the haughtiness of the terrible.

A similar prophecy concerning Egypt is found in Ezekiel:

And when I shall put thee out, I will cover the heaven, and make the stars thereof dark; I will cover the sun with a cloud, and the moon shall not give her light. All the bright lights of heaven will I make dark over thee, and set darkness upon thy land, saith the Lord God (32:7-8).

Dispensational **literalists** ignore all this. They also studiously avoid the inescapable exegetical problem of explaining literal falling stars. They just go on as if much of the language of Matthew 24 were not deeply symbolic. They refuse to see that Christ's words refer to the coming fall of Jerusalem and

the destruction of the Temple in A.D. 70. (David Chilton, *The Days of Vengeance*, Dominion Press, 1987.)

"This Generation!"

Self-proclaimed dispensational **literalists** date these supposedly literal astronomical events at least a thousand years before the final judgment (a millennium apparently without literal stars in the literal sky, though they never discuss this). They argue, correctly, that these events were not fulfilled literally in the first century; they then incorrectly conclude that these events will have to be fulfilled literally sometime in the future.

The problem for premillennialist in general and **dispensationalists** in particular comes with Jesus' obviously literal prophecy: "Verily I say unto you, This generation shall not pass, till all these things be fulfilled" (v. 34). This refers to the so-called generation of the fig tree: Judaism facing the decision to accept Christ's gospel (Matt. 21:18-22). This generation is said by premillennialist to be some future generation of Jews who will refuse to accept the gospel. This generation will go through a future Great Tribulation. Christ's prophecies here are still unfulfilled.

Postmillennialist and **amillennialists** deny this. Clearly, Jesus was speaking to His **own** generation of Jews who rejected His gospel. He was referring to people who were living during the lifetimes of those disciples who were standing before Him, listening to His **words**.

Bible-believing Christians therefore must choose which of Christ's words in Matthew 24 to take literally, meaning at face value: His prophecy of what will happen or His prophecy of **when** this will happen. If His words regarding timing are taken literally, then the falling stars and darkened sun cannot be taken literally. But premillennial commentators say that His words regarding what will happen must be taken literally (except for the business about falling stars, concerning which they remain discreetly silent). Therefore, they have been forced to construct a highly improbable explanation. They argue that "this **generation**" refers to a generation that is born at least 1,900 years after Christ spoke those words. They claim that Christ was referring to a future generation of Jews who would live in a future Jerusalem. He was not referring to anyone alive at the time that Jesus spoke His prophecy.

The State of Israel

But when will that prophesied generation of the fig tree appear? When will there be Jews in charge once again in the city of Jerusalem? These were the unanswered questions for dispensationalists from 1830 (when the dispensational system was invented) until 1948. Then, miracle of front-page miracles, they at long last received the long-sought answer: on May 14, 1948, Jews took over politically in Palestine after 1,800 years of dispersion, creating a national state. Millions of premillennial dispensationalists took the bait. They began to argue that the

terms of Christ's prophecy were at last being fulfilled. They are now on the exegetical hook.

There is a major exegetical problem with Israel's supposed confirmation of Bible prophecy, namely, that pretribulational dispensational theology officially holds that the "clock of prophecy" stopped with coming of the "Church Age," and that it will not start again until the secret Rapture of the saints immediately prior to the seven-year tribulation. Thus, an assertion that a single Bible prophecy has been fulfilled or is being fulfilled in our generation inescapably pushes the consistent pretribulational dispensationalist into a midtribulation or posttribulation position, which teaches that the church will go through the prophesied Great Tribulation. But the average pretribulationist in the pew did not understand this in 1948, and still very few of them do.

If Israel's generation of the fig tree began on May 14, 1948, which is what popular dispensationalism teaches, then the year 1988 is a very important year, for a generation in the Old Testament lasted 40 years. It was 40 years from the crucifixion to the fall of Jerusalem, which is why that era was the generation of the fig tree that never bore fruit, and which was therefore consumed by fire. This, of course, is not the dispensational interpretation of the fig tree generation. Still, the 40-year period has been universally accepted as defining a single generation. If you add 40 years to 1948, you get 1988.

What is now conveniently forgotten is that a good number of pre-1981 dispensational interpreters predicted that the Rapture would take place in 1981, and said so, in print and on tape, prior to 1981. I started collecting such prophecies back then. Why 1981? Because when you subtract the seven-year tribulation period from 1988, you get 1981. Well, we are now almost through that prophesied Great Tribulation, and we are still here. In fact, we have been able to get through it almost unscathed under the Presidency of Ronald Wilson Reagan (six letters in each name - 666).

There has been a significant abandonment of pretribulational dispensationalism since 1981. Some people are going posttrib. Most, however, are going postmillennial. The defections have only just begun. The troops are losing faith in the ability of the prophecy "experts" to read the "clock of prophecy." Therefore, 1988 is the most ominous year for dispensationalism since 1981. If as little of prophetic significance happens in 1988 as happened in 1981, the dispensationalist movement will begin to unravel - pretrib, midtrib, and posttrib. This is the reason I have launched *Dispensationalism in Transition* in 1988.

The End of the Road

When Hal Lindsey made his fortune in royalties from a series of paperback books that whooped up interest in the fulfillment of Bible prophecy, his alma mater, Dallas Theological Seminary, cautiously (as always) remained discreetly silent (as always). The faculty recognized three things by 1974: 1) Lindsey had captured the minds of most dispensationalists; 2) these people were the only people who might become (or remain) donors to the seminary; and 3) by focusing on the supposed fulfillment of prophecy in this, the Church Age, Lindsey's amateur efforts at writing systematic theology had given away the store to the critics of pretribulational dispensationalism.

Here is the problem: if a single Bible prophecy has been or is being literally fulfilled today, then the "clock of prophecy" has started prior to the Rapture, and pretribulational dispensationalism is exegetically dead. The hoped-for imminent return of Christ is **not** truly imminent if any unfulfilled Bible

prophecy stands between the cross and the secret Rapture. Yet the whole basis of Lindsey's popularity is his cheerleading for the idea that today's headline events are literal fulfillments of Bible prophecy. Remove this theme, and *Late, Great Planet Earth* would never have made it into a second printing. And now here come Constance Cumbey and Dave Hunt, calling the troops to a search for the Antichrist. (Constance says that Pat Robertson may be the Antichrist, a point I have debated with her on the radio. Does Dallas Seminary want to line up behind her banner? Doubtful.)

John Walvoord, formerly President of Dallas Seminary, whose task it was to raise the money to keep the doors open, saw the danger but would not openly identify Lindsey as its source. In the second edition of his book, *The Rapture Question* (Zondervan, 1979; first edition, 1957), he speaks volumes by his silence regarding Lindsey's numerous books. He does not include even one of them in his bibliography, except for a reference to a collection of essays in which Lindsey had an essay, *When Is Jesus Coming Again?*, and he refers in the text only to another man's essay in that book (midtrib theologian, Gleason Archer).

Walvoord made his point very clear: "The problem of imminency as is taught in relation to the Rapture is a major consideration in the debate between posttribulationism and pretribulationism. . ." (p. 69). He said that the doctrine of imminency "is the heart of pretribulationism" (p. 53). Thus, he concluded: "The hope of the return of Christ to take the saints to heaven is presented in John 14 as an imminent hope. The prospect of being taken to heaven at the coming of the Christ is not qualified by description of any signs or prerequisite events" (p. 73). In short, no Bible prophecies **are** being fulfilled today.

Pretrib seminary professors had to remain silent on this major rift within the pretrib camp because of the vulnerability of their schools' donor bases, yet Lindsey had naively and without conscious planning delivered the pretrib movement into the hands of its critics. Perhaps the brighter professors even recognized that Lindsey had opened up two great psychological chasms for the dispensational movement: 1981 and 1988. If so, they were quite correct in their fears.

Hal Lindsey's vast popularity in fact has sealed the fate of the entire dispensational movement (**all-tribs**). There has been neither a Rapture nor a Great Tribulation. The generation of Israel's fig tree grows steadily older - too old, in fact, to be taken seriously, prophetically speaking. The events of 1948 become steadily irrelevant for dispensational interpretations of biblical prophecy. So do the events of 1988. Hal Lindsey's second wave of exegetical bills comes due this year (the first wave appeared in 1981). All dispensationalists will have to pay his bills. For the remaining life of the movement, dispensationalism's spokesmen will try to explain away 1988. Dispensationalists cannot win this one. The year 1988 will prove to be the winter of their discontent. The embarrassed backpedaling and exegetical squirming will begin soon.

Conclusion

Thanks Hal. Thanks Constance. Thanks Dave. As best-selling amateur theologians, you have delivered your professional colleagues into our hands. To enter into public battle with us postmillennialists, they must at last publicly denounce your books. But if they publicly denounce your books, the deep rift in the pretribulational, premillennial camp will be exposed to the faithful dispensational troops, and donations to dispensational seminaries could slow to a trickle. We could not have done it without you!

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