



Dispensationalism in Transition



Challenging Traditional Dispensationalism's "Code of Silence"

SCOFIELDISM

PIETISM

Vol. III, No. 12

©ICE, 1990

December, 1990

THE ISRAEL OF GOD IN PROPHECY:

A Review of Its Hermeneutic

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As a convert from dispensationalist, I have an avid interest in dispensationalism as a major theological aberration within **orthodoxy**.¹ Consequently, I have a great interest in critical works analyzing it. One such work has recently come to my attention through a reader of I.C.E. materials. In a letter to Dr. Gary North from Mr. Bill Crouse of Richardson, Texas, a jewel of a work was brought to our attention.

Mr. Crouse writes: "I am a Dallas Seminary Grad who has dropped dispensationalism. . . . I have been reading many of the books published by ICE. I think there is a serious omission in your bibliographies. The following book by Hans K. LaRondelle, *The Israel of God in Prophecy*, is responsible for many Dallas grads leaving dispensationalism. Oddly enough, the book is published by Andrews University Press. The author is also a professor at Andrews."

This struck me as odd, too, since Andrews University is a Seventh-day Adventist school founded in 1874 in Berrien Springs, Michigan. Yet, though from an odd source, I have now read *The Israel of God in Prophecy: Principles of Prophetic Interpretation*² with amazement and delight. This 226 page work is a remarkable piece of biblical, theological analysis that is succinct, clear, and cogent – and quite destructive of dispensationalism. I was so taken by the work that I called my friend Walt Hibbard of Great Christian Books to see if he might be interested in carrying it.³ Though not without faults,⁴ it is a worthy contribution to the prophetii debates.

Having read this book, it almost made me wish I was dispensationalist again – so that I might leave in style. When I left dispensationalism back in the mid-1970s it was in an old (1945), large (339 pages) O. T. Allismobile. Trustworthy, to be sure, but somewhat dated. How nice it would have been to have had this sleek (226 pages), new (1983) LaRondelle!

Space considerations prohibit a full analysis of its contents. Basically, I will survey the first five chapters of the

twelve chapter book. These chapters deal with important foundational issues of hermeneutics.

The Unity of Scripture

In LaRondelle's introduction, he points out his "deep concern" for understanding the "Bible as an organic unity in Christ" (p. 2).⁶ He notes that a major problem facing the modern interpreter of prophetic writ is a common disregard for the **christological** "dimensions of the Old Testament prophecies. The prophetic view of history was never directed to secular events of a political nature, disconnected from the Messiah and His people" (p. 4).

This **christological** concern is also very **covenantal**. "Each Bible prophet kept his promises of blessing or threats of doom solidly and consistently in the focus of redemptive history. To interpret the prophetic messages as mere predictions of current social and political events in the Middle East would essentially transform the God of **Israel** into a soothsayer" (p. 2). How rude! He is already crushing dispensational toes.

Christian vs. Jewish Hermeneutics

A very important problem with the dispensational **hermeneutic** is, according to LaRondelle, that it is basically **pre-Christian**: "The Christian interpreter comes to the Old Testament with a different theological perspective than the Jewish expositor" (p. 7). "The Christian listens to the Bible 'stereo-phonically,' - that is, to both Testaments of **Holy Scripture** – because God's revelation in both Testaments is basically one and consistent" (p. 55). This is quite important to understand. The dispensational approach is fundamentally and historically erroneous, as is indicated in Christ's rebuke of the disciples for misconstruing the prophets by their Jewish exegesis (Luke 24:45). "We conclude, therefore: because Jesus Christ is the divine Interpreter of the Old Testament, He must open the Scripture to us; by Him our minds must be opened to see the messianic light in Israel's Scriptures" (p. 5).

The dispensational hermeneutic is encumbered with the dullness of the Christ-rejecting, Israel-focused hermeneutic (2 Cor. 3:14). "For the apostle Paul the central truth of the Hebrew Bible was not about Israel and its national future, but rather about Messiah Jesus, the Lord of Israel, the Redeemer of the world" (p. 6). Because of this problem, the dispensationalist interprets in "isolation from the total prophetic-messianic framework and falls 'into the pitfall of a geographic and ethnic **literalism**'" (p. 7).

6. Apparently, he dedicates the book to every Christian, except dispensationalists: "Dedicated to every person who searches for the basic unity and harmony of the progressive revelation of God in the Holy Scriptures" (p. iv).

1. Unfortunately, just when I was delighted we had passed the forty year mark beyond 1948 and the establishment of the State of Israel, I have learned that many recent dispensationalists are beginning to "bet the bank on the forty year mark past the 1967 Yom Kippur War! Nevertheless, I still believe the system will collapse under its own weight of excess baggage created by failed expectations.

2. Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 1983(3rd printing).

3. By the time this newsletter appears it will probably be available at GCB.

4. For instance, you will have to overlook the several quotations from Ellen G. White (pp. 6, 7, 82, 126, 25) and other Seventh-day Adventist sources (pp. 62, 126, 141, 166, 184). Although I was not able to detect any SDA distinctive within it.

5. Fortunately, it does not go into the unusual premillennialism of Seventh-day Adventism, involving its "investigative judgment," and so forth.

Find and You Shall Seek

As Reconstructionists have pointed out, LaRondelle notes that dispensationalism operates on the basis of a “predetermined principle of **literalism**” (p. 11). This imports a “presupposition forced upon God’s Word from the outside” rather than allowing for “understanding the Word of God. . . inductively from the inspired record itself” (p. 12).

He presents an able and telling argument that “promises concerning Israel as a people, dynasty, land, city, and mountain are not self-contained, isolated promises for the sake of Israel, but are integral parts of God’s progressive plan of salvation for the world” (p. 17). This explains why the New Testament writers “recognize Christ as the perfect fulfillment of God’s promises to the patriarchs and **Israel**” (p. 18); see Acts 26:6-7; 13:32-33; Gal. 3:22, 29. The letter of Jewish interpretation kills, but the Spirit of the New Testament interpretive approach gives life (2 Cor. 3:6).

LaRondelle notes that “even Israel’s prophets themselves attempted to fathom their own predictions (1 Peter 1 :10,11), compelled to confess ignorance over their own visions (Daniel 8:27; Zechariah 4:13) or words (Daniel 12:8). . . . Theological exegesis is also necessary” (p. 25). Taking Scofield’s statement “prophecies may never be spiritualized, but are always literal” requires that “not only must Israel be restored as a national theocracy, but also Edom, **Moab**, and Ammon” (see: Isa. 11 :14). LaRondelle agrees with A. B. Davidson that this leads to “the insanity of **literalism**” (p. 26).

Scofield Giveth and Scofield Taketh Away

Of course, a major problem with dispensationalism’s hermeneutic – besides its **pre-Christian** and presupposed character – is its failure to live up to its own “consistency.” LaRondelle tellingly points to several New *Scofield Reference Bible* inconsistencies in this regard (*NSRB*, pp. 29-31). The Song of Solomon becomes an allegory of Christ and the Church. The scarlet cord of Rahab pictures “safety through sacrifice” (*NSRB*, p. 261). Joseph has “many analogies” to Christ (*NSRB*, pp. 53, 59, 35). Boaz and Ruth portray Christ and His people (*NSRB*, p. 317). And so on.

Dispensationalism is so hog-tied by their literalism principle that they engage in unnecessary hair-splitting: “Dispensationalism tries to harmonize this apparent inconsistency of opposite principles – that the Church of Christ is *not predicted* in the Old Testament, while nevertheless the Church is *prefigured* in the Old Testament – by the device of compartmentalizing Scripture into two separate sections which would require two different principles of interpretation: *history* and *prophecy* with the Old Testament” (p. 30).

The Importance of a Typing Course

LaRondelle makes a strong case for the topological character of Old Testament Israel in Chapter 4. In doing this he notes that Paul’s reference to “our forefathers” (1 Cor. 10:1) “expresses the theological unity of Israel and the Church” (p. 40). He observes: “The topological approach of the New Testament is motivated by the idea of fulfillment in salvation history. Typology is a theology of the progression of God’s acts of salvation through Jesus Christ. . . . In the New Testament, typology is characterized by both a *historical* and a *theological* correspondence between type and antitype. The theological correlation consists in the fact that the Old Testament types are all determined theologically by their specified relation to *Yahweh*, the God of Israel, while all the New Testament antitypes are qualified by their relation to *Christ Jesus*, the Son of

God. Because the covenantal communion with God is established through Christ only, all typology in the New Testament converges and culminates in Christ. Because Christ fulfills and completes the Old Testament salvation history, New Testament typology originates, centers, and terminates in Christ.” (pp. 44-45).

Despite dispensational protestations, “over against all abstract spiritualizations and allegorizations, we affirm a literal, historical fulfillment of the Old Testament prophecy. One should be careful, however, not to be caught on the horns of a false dilemma, as if we should have to choose between two extreme positions: literalism or allegorism. . . . The nascent ‘typology’ in the Old Testament prophecy is not rooted in the widespread cyclic thinking of the surrounding pagan nations which anticipated that the last age in the cosmic course would automatically correspond to the first age. The concept of a literal recurrence of the past in the future age is a pagan motif that has been overcome by the typological approach of the Old Testament prophecy” (p. 53).

LaRondelle points out that “Jesus saw Himself in typological terms as the new Israel. Both times a ‘son of God’ was tested [cp. Matt. 4:1; Exe. 4:22; Deut. 8:5)]; both times the testing occurred just after their baptism [Matt. 3:16; 1 Cor. 10:2]; and each time there is the temptation to test God whether He will perform a miracle to fulfill His promises [Deut. 6:16; Exe. 17:2-7; Matt. 4:3-7], as well as the test whether Israel will worship God alone [Deut. 6:13-15; Matt. 4:10]. Israel had failed the test, but Jesus did pass the test in triumph on behalf of Israel and mankind. . . . The truth of Christ’s inclusive representation is the reason why the New Testament does not only affirm that direct and topological messianic prophecies are ‘fulfilled’ in Christ, but also that certain historical experiences in the lives of the Old Testament Israelites – mostly of Davidic kings – are also ‘fulfilled’ in Christ’s life” (p. 65). Thus, “what happened with Jesus of Nazareth and His people was not a tragic frustration or postponement of God’s plan and prophecies. On the contrary, according to the apostle Peter on the day of Pentecost, all these events took place ‘by God’s set purpose’ (Acts 2:23; cf. 4:28) as revealed in the Old Testament” (p. 66). Consequently, “the implication of Jesus’ principle of prophetic interpretation is revealing: Jesus *is* Israel, and in His resurrection Israel’s restoration is accomplished” (p. 68).

He urges we “accept the theological term *sensus plenior*, or ‘fuller meaning,’ in order to acknowledge that Israel’s Old Testament history has a deeper meaning than a purely historical-grammatical exegesis can bring to light. Guided by the proper controls, the concept of ‘fuller meaning’ or ‘deeper sense’ is valid and indispensable to recognize how the Gospel writers – and the Apocalypse – interpret the Old Testament” (p. 75).

Goodbye, Alumni!

No wonder “many Dallas grads [are] leaving dispensationalism” in a new LaRondelle. This book is an excellent biblico-theological analysis of prophetic interpretation. Not without fault,⁷ but excellent nonetheless. If you have a friend in a dispensational seminary, get him a copy of this book. They will be glad you did. And if you buy it from Walt Hibbard’s Great Christian Books, Walt will be glad, too!

7. Besides being Seventh-Day Adventist, it is soteriologically Arminian (p. 162), holds to a futurist approach to Revelation (p. 163), and is premillennial (p. 119).