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Problematic Use of Revelation in Dispensational Theologies

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Abstract

In lieu of an abstract, below is the essay's first paragraph.

Dispensationalist theologies that use the Book of Revelation as their primary source of evidence are exegetically and hermeneutically problematic. The dispensationalist doctrine utilizes scripture in consistently literal interpretations. Followers of these various theologies are often jarred when told to switch hermeneutical gears to better understand unfulfilled prophecies. The primary belief fueling these theologies concerns dispensations, or separated periods of time thought to reveal God's different purposes for human history and in particular the destinies of Israel and the Church. This paper seeks to demonstrate how these theological views fail to assess John's use of symbolic language throughout Revelation and consequently raises questions as to the validity of end time prophecy.
Problematic Use of *Revelation* in Dispensational Theologies
A Critique

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(Class of 2015)

**Introduction**

Dispensationalist theologies that use the Book of Revelation as their primary source of evidence are exegetically and hermeneutically problematic. The dispensationalist doctrine utilizes scripture in consistently literal interpretations. Followers of these various theologies are often jarred when told to switch hermeneutical gears to better understand unfulfilled prophecies. The primary belief fueling these theologies concerns dispensations, or separated periods of time thought to reveal God’s different purposes for human history and in particular the destinies of Israel and the Church. This paper seeks to demonstrate how these theological views fail to assess John’s use of symbolic language throughout Revelation and consequently raises questions as to the validity of end time prophecy.

Political and cultural dangers arise, moreover, when the biblical text of Revelation is thus taken literally. For example, with Israel becoming a nation state in 1948, dispensational evangelicals have stepped upon the road to a final conflagration, or Armageddon. In support of such views the following text from Ezekiel is cited 37:21-22: “I will take the Israelites out of the nations where they have gone. I will gather them from all around and bring them back into their own land. I will make them one nation in the land, on the mountains of Israel. There will be one king over all of them and they will never again be two nations or be divided into two kingdoms.” Dispensationalist understandings of such texts have, among other things, led to an uncritical evaluation of military engagements on the part of the state of Israel since its inception.

I am motivated in this study by my interest in apocalyptic and prophetic texts, especially the Book of Revelation. Its uniqueness in presenting a wrathful God could elicit alarm though it inspires me to ask how one *could*, or better, *should* understand this text. The unspecified time for the fulfillment of purported prophesies has set
me on a pursuit looking for personal understanding of Revelation that I hope others will find beneficial in their own spiritual journey.

In this work, I will discuss the various types of dispensationalist theology pertaining to their differences, similarities, and world views. I will also seek to uncover an alternative hermeneutical lens faithful to the text yet freed from its misuse as a way of reading contemporary events or speculating about the future.

Chapter 1 – Understanding Dispensationalist Theologies

Although the term dispensationalism sounds foreign to most, it encompasses one of the most influential and rapidly growing evangelical theologies today. The ideas behind modern dispensational thought were first heavily developed by the French philosopher Pierre Poiret in 1687. His 6 volumes of L’Oeconomie Divine set up a systematic theology in a genuine dispensational scheme such that his 7th period or dispensation discusses a literal thousand-year bodily reign by Christ.\(^1\) In the next fifty years after L’Oeconomie Divine, Isaac Watts produced a separate theology describing dispensations within the Bible that, over two hundred years later, would provide the identical outline for the Scofield Reference Bible.\(^2\)

True dispensational thought did not see its roots planted until the Brethren Movement, in early nineteenth century Britain, which held strong regards for the ordinary believer over that of the hierarchy of the church. For this primary reason, followers placed heavy interest on personal Bible study. The movement in Britain sparked numerous publications from authors such as John Nelson Darby, William Kelly, and Benjamin Wills Newton who each contributed major personalized devotional studies. Each author, most notably Darby, was able to systematize previous theologians literature of early dispensational thought into an influential practice. Their work soon saw impact in the United States where it grew into a series of Bible Conferences beginning with the Niagara Bible Conference in 1876.

One prominent participant of these Bible conferences, Cyrus Ingerson Scofield, produced a reference Bible in 1909. The Scofield Reference Bible laid out theological and interpretive annotations of scripture such that the

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\(^1\) Millenarian views have been dated to go back as early as 98 A.D. The more contemporary views established after the Brethren Movement portray the beliefs I will focus on.

\(^2\) Ryrie, Charles C., Dispensationalism (Moody Publishers, 2007)
discussions and ideas from the Bible conferences could be accessed by all around the world. Scofield used his reference Bible to divide the Bible according to seven dispensations: Innocence, Conscience, Human government, Promise, Law, Grace, and Kingdom. This Bible finds its greatest influence within evangelist D. L. Moody’s congregation, a longtime supporter of dispensational theology since its debut at the Niagara Conference. Its publication and vigorous distribution led to the literal interpretive system used being as coined contemporary “dispensationalism”.

The Dispensations

The stem “dispensation” of the term dispensationalism, refers to a divine order that prevails at a particular period of history. It may also be understood as an era in which humanity is tested as to his obedience of God.

A dispensation is God’s distinctive method of governing mankind or a group of men during a period of human history, marked by a crucial event, test, failure, and judgment.

Dispensationalists recognize this as saying that God’s purposes and work with humans differs at various points in time. Where God’s covenants made with humanity change, end, or are added to, dispensationalists separate the scripture.

A stewardship may end at an appointed time (Gal. 4:2). In this reference the end of stewardship came because of a different purpose being introduced. This reference also shows that a dispensation is connected with time.

Some dispensationalists see three, five, or many more separate dispensations within the Bible, however, the theologies commonly break scripture into a seven-dispensation scheme so as to simplify their understanding of the Bible.

The first dispensation is known as the “dispensation of innocence” covering the time of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. This period is characterized by God commanding Adam and Eve to replenish the earth with children, mollify the earth, reign over the animals, care for Eden, and not to eat the forbidden fruit.

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3 Cohen, Gary, Understanding Revelation: An Investigation of the Key Interpretational and Chronological Questions Which Surround the Book of Revelation (Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2001)
4 DeWitt, Dale, Dispensational Theology In America During The 20th Century, First Edition (Grand Rapids, MI: Grace Bible College, 2002)
6 Ryrie, Charles C., Dispensationalism (Moody Publishers, 2007)
7 Ryrie, Charles C., Dispensationalism (Moody Publishers, 2007)
dispensation called the “dispensation of conscience” begins with Adam and Eve’s eviction from the Garden of Eden for eating the forbidden fruit. Dispensationalists see five characteristics here: a curse on Satan, a curse on childbearing, a curse on nature, imposing work for food production, and a covenant from God that his son Christ will rule over Satan. This dispensation is thought to end with the beginning of the flood.

The third “dispensation of human government” thus follows the destruction of life on earth with exception of Noah’s family. The theology teaches God making commands and promise to Noah such that He will not curse the earth again, there will never be a worldwide flood, Noah is too replenish the earth with humans, humans will rule over animals, humans may eat meat, law is to be established, and the sign of God’s promise will be the rainbow. The third dispensation is thought to end with God’s dispersion of humans over the earth.

The fourth dispensation is known as the “dispensation of promise” detailing the period of the Abrahamic Covenant to the exodus of Jewish people from Egypt. The fifth dispensation is referred to as the “dispensation of law” which culminates with the death of Jesus Christ. During this dispensation, God is said to deal specifically with the Jewish nation who eventually lose their promised land through disobedience.

The final two dispensations focused on by dispensationalists comprise the topics which will be most emphasized in this work. The sixth, “dispensation of grace”, is understood to have begun with the death of Jesus Christ and will end with the rapture of the church. Dispensationalists teach this to be the dispensation in which we are currently living. This dispensation is characterized by three major aspects: man’s responsibility is to believe in Jesus, God will work with both Jews and gentiles, and no one knows when the rapture will come. The seventh and final dispensation is coined the “millennial kingdom of Christ” in which dispensationalists believe Christ Himself will return to earth to rule for one thousand years. During this period, Satan is said to be bound until the dispensations end with the final judgment and establishment of the new earth.

Interpretations within these dispensations have led to considerable diversity within dispensationalist theology spawning revisions such as progressive and ultra-dispensationalism. However extensive their differences, there are some commonalities across them which entwine their individualized branching to the common definition of dispensationalism.

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Features of Traditional Dispensationalism

One common feature referred to by dispensationalist theologies are the dispensations which have been previously laid out: The understanding that the different dispensations throughout history are drawn from a belief that the scripture exposes them as such. This division of scripture provides a division in the way humans interact with God throughout history. Common practice within dispensationalist theologies seems to be division of dispensations, whether three, four, seven, or more, based upon new revelations provided to man by God.⁹

Multiple theologians including Watt, Darby, and Scofield each derive their systematic breakdown of scripture into dispensations from another basic, yet vital, head of dispensationalist thought: literal interpretation of scripture. The theology insists on consistent literal interpretation of prophesy.¹⁰ Emphasis is placed on interpreting scripture as it is written so that biblical symbols, metaphors, and figures are understood purely as they are written. Charles Ryrie, a leading theologian on Dispensational thought, articulated an extensive definition for dispensational literalism:

This is sometimes called the principle of grammatical-historical interpretation since the meaning of each word is determined by grammatical and historical considerations. The principle might also be called normal interpretation since the literal meaning of words is the normal approach to their understanding in all languages. It might also be designated plain interpretation so that no one receives the mistaken notion that the literal principle out figures the speech. Symbols, figures and speech and types are all interpreted plainly in this method and they are in no way contrary to literal interpretation. After all, the very existence of any meaning for a figure of speech depends on all the reality of the literal meaning of the terms involved. Figures often make the meaning plainer, but it is the literal, normal, or plain meaning that they convey to the reader.¹¹

This interpretation thought process stems from roots within the Brethren Movement where high authority is given to the scripture itself: The belief that the Bible is the direct and literal diction spoken by God places scriptural understanding in great importance for adoption into everyday life of dispensationalists. Such literalism begins to lay down a sort of road map within the New Testament, specifically in the book of Revelation.

Such a guide in Revelation leads to another common belief across most dispensationalist theologies: a pretribulation Rapture.¹² Pre-tribulationists believe that Christ will physically return once, before His bodily ruling

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⁹ DeWitt, Dale, *Dispensational Theology In America During The 20th Century*, First Edition (Grand Rapids, MI: Grace Bible College, 2002)
¹¹ Ice, Thomas D., ‘Dispensational Hermeneutics’, *Article Archives*, 2009, 115
¹² The Tribulation refers to the book of Revelation discussing times of troubles that the earth will have to endure. It is a time where the wrath and anger of God will be felt on earth. The Rapture refers to an event in Revelation where believers of Christ are to be taken to heaven.
of the thousand-year kingdom\textsuperscript{13}, in the days before the tribulations to rapture believers into heaven. As the church is not believed to be on earth for the tribulation in “pretribulation” thought, dispensationalists begin to take a futurist tone in arguing that recent events cannot be fulfillments of the tribulations because the church is still on earth. A competing thought within other evangelical systems lies in the idea of a “post-tribulation” in which the Rapture occurs at the end of the tribulations. Differing tribulation beliefs is a dividing point within the different dispensationalist theologies, mainly progressive and traditional, where scholars such as John Walvoord have argued for literal historic New Testament revelations being fulfilled in modern military action.\textsuperscript{14}

Dispensationalists thus also hold a premillennialism viewpoint where the millennial or thousand-year kingdom is to occur along with the second coming of Christ. Postmillennialism sees the second coming of Christ to occur after His millennial reign. Postmillennialists also tend to stray from literal interpretation of a bodily thousand-year reign and instead see an extended period of time where the world will become increasingly “better” through the gospel. Postmillennialism also lacks a period of tribulations. Based on their foundation of literal interpretation and a “pretribulation” Rapture, dispensationalists have adopted the premillennialism doctrine.

Dispensational thought also leans on the significance of purported biblical prophecy. When looking in the scripture of Revelation, literalism produces the dispensational belief that God’s future interaction with humans will be earthly and in physical presence. Craig Blaising, a leader for progressive dispensationalism, summarizes this futuristic premillennialism by stating:

Like most premillenialists, dispensationalists interpret biblical prophecy to teach that Christ will return during a time of trouble traditionally called “the Tribulation”. However, unlike most premillennialists, most dispensationalists have advocated the doctrine of pretribulation Rapture – the doctrine that Christ will come for the church prior to the tribulation, resurrecting the dead in Christ, translating living believers into immortal life, and then taking the church with Him to heaven prior to His millennial return in which He will visibly rule the nations of earth.\textsuperscript{15}

An outcome of earthly interactions within literalism of Revelation is an expectation that grace and redemption will be on a worldly level covering the nations present during the tribulations. Again, these acts are hypothetically not to occur until a time marked by the pretribulation thought. The imminent return of Christ, to most dispensationalists, is believed to be at any point as they reference adequate earthly trouble to warrant Christ’s Rapture.

\textsuperscript{13} The thousand-year kingdom or millennial kingdom refers to an event described in Revelation where Christ is to return to earth and rule with humanity.

\textsuperscript{14} Walvoord, J. F., and J. E. Walvoord, ‘Armageddon, Oil, and the Middle East Crisis’, 1980

Lastly, the prominent feature of a national material Israel is defended in dispensationalist belief. In this, a distinction is made between the Israel of the historical past and the church, both which have separate ways of salvation through Christ. Charles Ryrie quotes theologian Daniel Fuller who insists on the distinction between two terms:

Thus it appears that the olive tree analogy yields the natural interpretation that there is but one people of God throughout redemptive history. Prior to the Cross, this people was composed largely of Jews who through faith and obedience inherited the promises made to Abraham. Since the Cross, this group has comprised Gentiles who are made equally the heirs of the promises to Abraham. The term “Church” applies properly only to that group since the Cross, just as “Israel” applies properly to the group before the Cross and to the ethnic entity who traces its descent from Abraham.\(^\text{16}\)

Again, the literalism divulging dispensations around God’s various acts and covenants within the Bible have produced this dispensational thought. Some further belief for this separation is found in the Abrahamic Covenant eluding to a “notion of unconditional ethnic promises” as said by D. S. DeWitt.\(^\text{17}\)

The majority of these features have given dispensationalist theologies a pessimistic worldview. For example, the dispensations are viewed by dispensationalists to be revelations of God which test humankind. Each of these “tests” however leads to human failure and judgment by the divine. Thus, this predestined failure repeats itself through the dispensations culminating with the ascension to heaven. The continuous build up through dispensation failure produces an apocalyptic hunger in dispensationalist thought where the church serves only as a human ark.

\textit{Variances within Dispensationalism}

From this common core of dispensational thought, variances have arisen separating different types of dispensationalism. The previous commonalities discussed culminate to the traditional dispensationalist thought, containing the majority view today which reflects most opinions of the \textit{Revised Scofield Reference Bible}. The two other primary types that will be further studied in this chapter will be progressive dispensationalism and ultra-dispensationalism.

Diverging from the traditional dispensationalist theology rose a new position in 1986 that later in 1991, adopted the label of “progressive dispensationalism”.\(^\text{18}\) The new movement was led by both Darrell Bock and Craig Blaising who advocated for differences in the relationships between the dispensations. Their focal argument

\(^{16}\) Ryrie, Charles C., \textit{Dispensationalism} (Moody Publishers, 2007)
\(^{17}\) DeWitt, Dale, \textit{Dispensational Theology In America During The 20th Century}, First Edition (Grand Rapids, MI: Grace Bible College, 2002)
revolves around a belief that redemption among humans is *progressive* through the dispensations. Thus, God’s work and plan is *compounded* through the dispensations and has more value than a basic chronological ordering. Ryrie derives this statement to summarize progressive revelation:

Progressive revelation is the recognition that God’s message to man was not given in one single act but was unfolded in a series of successive acts and through the minds and hands of many men of varying backgrounds. It is, so to speak, a theistic view of revelation rather than deistic view. The pages of the Bible present “not the exposition of a revelation completed, but the records of a revelation in progress. Its parts and features are seen, not as arranged after their development, but as arranging themselves in the course of their development, and growing, through stages which can be marked, and by accessions which can be measured, into the perfect form which they attain at last.”

The common disconnect between this thought and traditional dispensationalism is that traditionalist’s view the supposed current “dispensation of grace” as a parenthesis or tangent in fulfillment of the covenants described in the prior dispensations which will not resume until after the rapture occurs. Progressive dispensationalists derive their rational from a partial fulfillment of the covenant with Israel that is ongoing through the “dispensation of grace” and will be fulfilled in the future.

A progressive dispensationalist further looks at Old Testament quotes in the New Testament to not only have the potential role of being used for point emphasis but instead as a potential fulfillment of a covenant from a previous dispensation. This introduction of complementary hermeneutics in progressive dispensational theology emanates a belief that Old Testament repetition in the New Testament offers some sort of advancement or addition in a previous covenant such that it is either being partially or completely fulfilled. In this practice, progressive dispensationalists draw intimate connections through the dispensations, rejecting the traditional dispensational understanding of a current parenthesis.

Ultra-dispensationalism differs from traditional dispensational thought over when the church began. This form of dispensationalist practice saw its inception under the ministry of Ethelbert Bullinger. The traditional dispensationalist standpoint is that the church began at Pentecost where the ultra-dispensationalist sees the church forming later under the direction of Paul. Two groups divide the ultra-dispensationalism theology into a moderate and an extreme. The extreme group sees the church’s inception coinciding with the book of Acts. The moderate group, led by J. C. O’Hair, view the church as beginning sometime before Paul wrote his first epistle.

O’Hair evidently believed that the church began with the pronouncement recorded in Acts 13:46 – “We are turning to the Gentiles” – since after this event “there is no record that Paul or Peter, or any other

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messenger of the Lord, had divine authority to offer the prophesied kingdom to Israel, if that nation would repent.  

In this, both ultra-dispensational thoughts look at the time between Pentecost and the end of the church age as being separated by more than one dispensation.

**Chapter 2 – Use of the Book of Revelation in Dispensational Theologies**

At the end of the Bible lies the last book of the New Testament, the Book of Revelation. Comprised in its 22 chapters are prophetic views supposedly written by “John”. The contents of his writing in this book come from numerous visions which are revealed by an angel sent from Jesus. The visions shared describe a series of events involving tribulations on earth, Jesus’s second coming, and creation of a new heaven and earth. The scripture of Revelation contains some of the most debated prophetic text found within the Bible. Dispensational hermeneutics focuses heavily on understanding events such as the Rapture, the Tribulation, and the millennial kingdom found within Revelation.

The argument of authorship of the book of Revelation could be a thesis in of itself. I therefore acknowledge the theological debate around who this “John” author is or is not. For stylistic simplicity through this chapter, I will refer to the author only as John as it is stated verbatim in Revelation without assessing the true nature of his name.

**The Rapture**

The term “Rapture” refers to an event in which Christ returns to earth to raise those who believe in Him to heaven. This act of deliverance by way of the Lord, although not explicitly titled such in the Bible, is purported to leave behind the non-believers on earth. The viewpoints on when this event is to occur vary depending on the interpretive lens used when studying the book of Revelation. Dispensational thought focuses around a pretribulation belief in which the tribulation does not occur until the Rapture has been concluded. The theologies’ pretribulation thought stems from their literal interpretation of multiple Revelation chapters, most notably sparked with Revelation 3:10-11:

> Because you have kept my word of patient endurance, I will keep you from the hour of trial that is coming on the whole world to test the inhabitants of earth. I am coming soon; hold fast to what you have, so that no one may seize your crown.

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The pretribulation position derived from these verses can be further understood by J. Dwight’s delivery:

“I will keep thee from the hour of temptation.” John uses the word ἔφυρον ἑκ. Thayer says that when this verb is used with ἐν it means “to cause one to persevere or stand firm in a thing”; while when it is used with ἑκ it means “by guarding to cause one to escape in safety out of.” Since ἑκ is used here it would indicate that John is promising a removal from the sphere of testing, not a preservation through it. This is further substantiated by the use of the words “the hour.” God is not only guarding from the trials but from the very hour itself when these trials will come on those earth dwellers.

It becomes evident that a belief of removal prior to the tribulations discussed further in later chapters of Revelation is taken from the use of the word keep perhaps instead of a post-tribulation diction of through. However, the language here does not allude to an idea of bodily removal from the impending tribulation. For if He is to keep those from the tribulation, can it be understood as a “protective shrouding” from the earthly troubles that will conclude? Perhaps the argument could be made that a “guarding” of those meant to be protected “during” the tribulation will occur all while they remain bodily here on earth.

Pre-tribulation scholars such as Walvoord argue that the Greek stem refers to a “keep from” and not a “keep within”. He goes on to further assume that the promise was to represent being kept from “the hour” of trial, not just the trials in the hour. As this case is strongly supported in other theologians work, the lack of how this “keeping from” is to be established by way of the Rapture is missing from this scripture. All that could be concluded from this is an implied and theoretical rapture.

Further dispensational pretribulation thought is taken from Revelation 4:4. The scripture gives the first view of twenty-four elders:

Around the throne are twenty-four thrones, and seated on the thrones are twenty-four elders, dressed in white robes, with golden crowns on their heads.

Pretribulation scholars argue that the elder’s presence in heaven is an indication that the Rapture has already taken place. Their evidence is taken from the statement that these twenty-four elders have golden crowns upon their heads. Dispensational literalism advocates that these men are only to be given the golden crowns once the second coming of Christ has occurred.

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22 Townsend, Jeffrey L. “The rapture in Revelation 3:10.” Bibliotheca Sacra 137, no. 547 (July 1, 1980) offers a deep analysis of the Greek terminology divulged here. Townsend uses a systematic breakdown of the diction also comparing the two terms ἐν and ἑκ within both the New and Old Testaments.
23 J. Dwight Pentecost, Things to Come (Grand Rapids: Dunham, 1958).
26 The trials of the Tribulation period have not yet been described to at this point in the book of Revelation. Thus those following a dispensational chronological literalism hold the belief that this vision is prior to the Tribulation, not purportedly described until later in chapters 6-19.
Some arguments to this strict literal interpretation can be found in the first assumption that these elders are in fact men. The scripture does not explicitly state the origin of these elders. Thus it may be appropriate to understand the elders as a class of angels or other divine beings. Perhaps this scripture should be taken metaphorically such that this number of elders is symbolic of something divine. John’s description may have been the best, but not purely precise, way of describing the visions being shown to him. Some, many, or possibly all of the visions shared with John may have been unexplainable with pure human language, thus John used symbolic language in an attempt to represent what he saw.

Furthermore, even if the elders do represent a physical collection of men, the verse does not describe how these individuals came to their place in heaven. This idea is supported by K. H. Essex in writing:

Even if the elders represent the church alone, the text does not specifically mention the rapture as the means of their heavenly arrival. Again, they may only represent non-resurrected Christians who have died and are then in the presence of God. In short, the mention of the twenty-four elders in the book of Revelation does not prove the pretribulation Rapture.27

In this sense, the dispensational literal hermeneutic only infers that the Rapture was the source of the elder’s appearance in heaven. Dispensationalists expand on this by only assuming that the Rapture must have occurred by this point.

Opposed to the dispensational pretribulation Rapture thought is that of the post-tribulation view. This understanding sees the Rapture occurring in the latter chapters of Revelation, Rev 20:4, after the tribulation period has occurred:

Then I saw thrones, and those seated on them were given authority to judge. I also saw the souls of those who had been beheaded for their testimony to Jesus and for the word of God. They had not worshipped the beast or its image and had not received its mark on their foreheads or their hands. They came to life and reigned with Christ for a thousand years.28

Post-tribulation scholars defend their position by saying that this verse describes a resurrection of all the righteous dead, which is thought to occur at the same time as the Rapture. However, the problem again arises for pretribulation scholars in that the term Rapture, or term used to describe such an event, is lacking in the scripture to assess how the souls described came to reign with Christ.

The Great Tribulation

Dispensational belief lays down a literal hermeneutic for the time known as the Tribulation. Detailed to begin in Revelation 6, John first describes the opening of seven seals followed by the sounding of seven trumpets. The sounding of the trumpets are described as each bringing catastrophic time and trouble to the earth. Dispensationalists see the opening of the seven seals, sounding of the seven trumpets, and pouring of the seven bowls to mark the period of tribulation. Thus for this reason, their literal interpretation of the seven years of catastrophes depicted by John appears after their understanding of the Rapture event previously discussed.

Dispensational futurism is derived from their literal interpretation of this large portion of Revelation where they see such events described as having not yet occurred in our present time. For instance, reading Revelation 8:8-9 with literal hermeneutic, dispensationalists recognize that such a time of sea turning to blood has not already happened:

The second angel blew his trumpet, and something like a great mountain, burning with fire, was thrown into the sea. A third of the sea became blood, a third of the living creatures in the sea died, and a third of the ships were destroyed.

One does not need to be dispensationalist to draw the conclusion that one-third of the sea has not turned to blood in modern history. But is this one of the instances of Revelation that is better understood when not taken literally?

Perhaps another example which a literal hermeneutic fails to assess is in Revelation 6:5-6:

When he opened the third seal, I heard the third living creature call out, ‘Come!’ I looked, and there was a black horse! Its rider held a pair of scales in his hand, and I heard what seemed to be a voice in the midst of the four living creatures saying, ‘A quart of wheat for a day’s pay, and three quarts of barley for a day’s pay, but do not damage the olive oil and the wine!’

This verse can be taken to contain many symbolic figures that a literal hermeneutic may miss in interpretation. Literal interpretation sees a physical horseman that seems to be set out to collect wheat and barley while not harming olive oil or wine. But do any of these phrases, in John’s time of authorship, mean or carry a different understanding as they do to us now? Klotz seems to signify the grape vine, which produces wine, as an Old Testament representation of Jewish people.

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29 Walvoord J. F., Premillennialism and the Tribulation, Bibliotheca Sacra (1953)
31 Ibid
Furthermore, the olive is an abundant fruit in the Holy Land which may also represent Gentiles as evident in Romans 11:17-24.\textsuperscript{33} So perhaps the olive oil and wine referred to have a symbolic meaning of select people or holy locations that are to go unharmed. The cultural lens for when John is supposed to have written Revelation can be assumed to be a reason for these symbolic terms that coincide with Old Testament scripture.

If one was to read this with no literal language at all, the horseman and how he is described may be a metaphor for an idea or trial the earth will face. In this, no literal horseman is to ride across the earth bringing his specific plague along with him. Instead, the symbolism of a horseman may represent the speed and swiftness of the blights to be inflicted upon earth and the scale that is carried to mean fairness or justice.

The fine line in finding when such verses should be interpreted literally or symbolically lies in the context of the passage and intent of the author. It seems to be of theological understanding that supposed biblical prophecy is an area of which figurative language is heavily employed and thus must be read as so.

All conservative interpreters of the Bible believe that the scriptures should be interpreted literally. But a literal interpretation of scripture involves recognition of symbolic nature of some passages. Apocalyptic prophecy makes a considerable use of symbolism. Dispensationalists insist on giving a literal interpretation to passages that are clearly intended to be symbolic or allegorical.\textsuperscript{34}

\textit{The Millennial Kingdom}

Another such topic divulged in the book of Revelation is the nature of the millennial kingdom.\textsuperscript{35} It is common practice then that one’s hermeneutical lens would be closely connected to the way the millennial kingdom is viewed. Generally, those who approach interpreting prophecy by allegorical means take up either a-millennialism or postmillennialism position. Those, such as dispensationalists, who utilize literal hermeneutics, embrace the thought of premillennialism.

\textsuperscript{33} Bible, New Revised Standard Version. "Catholic Edition." (1999), Romans 11:17-24: But if some of the branches were broken off, and you, a wild olive shoot, were grafted in their place to share the rich root of the olive tree, do not boast over the branches. If you do boast, remember that it is not you that support the root, but the root that supports you. You will say, “Branches were broken off so that I might be grafted in.” That is true. They were broken off because of their unbelief, but you stand only through faith. So do not become proud, but stand in awe. For if God did not spare the natural branches, perhaps he will not spare you. Note then the kindness and severity of God: severity toward those who have fallen, but God’s kindness towards you, provided you continue in his kindness; otherwise you will also be cut off. And even those of Israel, if they do not persist in unbelief, will be grafted in, for God has the power to graft them in again. For if you have been cut from what is by nature a wild olive tree and grafted, contrary to nature, into a cultivated olive tree, how much more will these natural branches be grafted back into their own olive tree.

\textsuperscript{34} Woodbridge N., A Biblical Critique of the Two-fold Theory of Dispensationalism: The Distinction between Israel and the Church.

\textsuperscript{35} The millennial kingdom, in general, is a period time in which Christ will reign prior to the final judgment. Differences on when or for how long this period is said to last will be discussed in detail in this section.
Dispensational premillennialism holds to their literal interpretation by teaching that Christ will come before the millennial kingdom at the time of the Rapture. During this second coming, He will establish a literal thousand-year kingdom which He will physically rule. They see Christ coming down out of heaven to which the souls of those martyred during the time of the Antichrist will be physically resurrected to rule with Him for one thousand years. During this time, Satan is believed to also be physically bound in a bottomless pit as stated in Revelation 20:1-3:

Then I, [John], saw an angel coming down from heaven, holding in his hand the key to the bottomless pit and a great chain. He seized the dragon, that ancient serpent, who is the Devil and Satan, and bound him for a thousand years, and threw him into the pit, and locked and sealed it over him, so that he would deceive the nations no more, until the thousand years were ended. After that he must be let out for a little while.36

Dispensationalists draw support from premillennial thought as it also fulfills previous dispensation’s covenants with Israel: the Abrahamic, the Palestinian, the Davidic, and the New. This physical ruling by Christ is believed to fulfill the promises made to Israel of having a designated land, ruler, and blessing.

Could it be possible that these prophesies about Christ ruling are fulfilled in His spiritual rule from heaven? A dispensationalist would argue the covenants made with Israel then are not fulfilled unless this bodily ruling is made. But if we repeat the same rhetoric that biblical prophecy can be interpreted allegorically, then it may be plausible to see the covenants fulfilled from a heavenly realm, assuming that the covenants are unconditional.

Perhaps further critique of dispensational premillennialism can be taken from discussion of the other two competing views of the millennial kingdom. In a-millennialism, it is believed that Christ’s reign is a symbol of His spiritual presence and rule from heaven. Thus, a-millennialists see no physical kingdom on earth ruled by Christ:

A-millennialism is that view of the last things which holds that the Bible does not predict a “millennium” or a period of worldwide peace and righteousness on this earth before the end of the world. A-millennialism teaches that there will be a parallel and contemporaneous development of good and evil – God’s kingdom and Satan’s kingdom – in this world, which will continue until the second coming of Christ. At the second coming of Christ, the resurrection and judgment will take place, followed by the eternal order of things – the absolute, perfect kingdom of God.37

Although their use of symbolism in understanding this area of Revelation is what most scholars agree on, a-millennialism is often critiqued for understanding the covenants with Israel as being conditional. However, a-millennialism cannot be disregarded for its use of allegorical hermeneutics. Its success in using allegory however can be diminished by not understanding when to use non-symbolic or literal approaches.

Postmillennialism holds to an allegorical approach for interpreting Revelation that sees the occurrence of an extended period of time marked by peace and prosperity. Most defined is their belief that the church will continue to convert the world to Christianity. Postmillennialists understand Revelation 19:11-21 to be symbolic of the millennial kingdom characterized by Christianizing the world:

Then I saw heaven opened, and there was a white horse! Its rider is called Faithful and True, and in righteousness he judges and makes war. His eyes are like a flame of fire, and on his head are many diadems; and he has a name inscribed that no one knows but himself. He is clothed in a robe dipped in blood, and his name is called The Word of God. And the armies of heaven, wearing fine linen, white and pure, were following him on white horses. From his mouth comes a sharp sword with which to strike down the nations, and he will rule them with a rod of iron; he will treat the wine press of fury of the wrath of God the Almighty. On his robe and on his thigh he has a name inscribed, ‘King of kings and Lord of lords.’

Then I saw an angel standing in the sun, and with a loud voice he called to all the birds that fly in mid-heaven, ‘Come, gather for the great supper of God, to eat the flesh of kings, the flesh of captains, the flesh of the mighty, the flesh of horses and their riders – flesh of all, both free and slave, both small and great.’

Then I saw the beast and the kings of the earth with their armies gathered to make war against the rider on the horse and against his army. And the beast was captured, wand with it the false prophet who had performed in its presence the signs by which he deceived those who had received the mark of the beast and those who worshipped its image. These two were thrown alive into the lake of fire that burns with sulfur. And the rest were killed by the sword of the rider on the horse, the sword that came from his mouth; and all the birds were gorger with their flesh.

They also see this millennial period as possibly being much more than a millennium or one thousand years.

In their view, futurism is diminished as past and recent historical events are seen as fulfilling the diminishment of sin and evil in the world needed for establishing the millennial kingdom. They note the abolishment of slavery, increased accessibility to scripture, destruction of dictators, and other various spreading of Christianity as fulfillments of the tribulation as well as for the metaphoric picture described in Revelation.39 In this, postmillennialists understand the millennial kingdom to be worldly, not with the literal presence of Christ as understood by dispensational premillennialism, brought by the gospel and spirit of Christianization of the world.

Postmillennialism hermeneutics oppose the dispensational literal interpretation of how the Davidic covenant is to be fulfilled. It acknowledges, as premillennialism does, that the Davidic covenant is unconditional, such that it will be fulfilled. Where it then perhaps triumphs over premillennial thought is in understanding that this covenant is fulfilled by Christ’s reign in heaven. Premillennialists argue for a literal reign of the throne of David, but could this throne not be literal if just in the heavenly realm? In this sense the covenant will, or could already, be fulfilled by Christ taking His seat at the right hand of God. However, it is only appropriate to acknowledge post-

39 Ibid
millennialism’s potential downfall in recognizing the current state of evil and good in the world. It remains to speculation and everyone’s individual cultural lens to assess if the world is in fact becoming more Christ like.

In assessing these three major views of the millennial kingdom as described in Revelation, some definition can be drawn between them based upon the hermeneutic employed. Studying this notion that biblical prophecy may best be understood with a symbolic hermeneutic uncovers the dangers that a strict dispensational premillennialism thought may have. A blended idea of post/pre millennialism may offer the proper metaphoric and literal tools to better understand the millennial kingdom.

**Biblical Numerology**

Throughout Revelation, various quantities or numbers are referred to. In Revelation 5:1, a description of the seven seals is first brought to the reader:

> Then I saw in the right hand of the one seated on the throne a scroll written on the inside and on the back, sealed with seven seals.  

Later throughout Revelation 6, each seal is opened and detailed to contain either a horseman with a specific task or an earthly event. Dispensationalists teach the seven seals to be considered literally such that seven seals will be opened in heaven producing seven specific outcomes. Perhaps though, the specific number is representative of something more. Roy Anderson notes that to the Hebrew the number seven represents perfection. This implication of completeness in the number seven can alter an entire interpretive view of Revelation.

The seven churches being wrote to by John in Revelation 1:4, the seven trumpets each given to one of seven angels in Revelation 8:2, and the seven bowls in Revelation 16:1 all use this number of total completeness:

> John to the seven churches that are in Asia: Grace to you and peace from him who is and who was and who is to come, and from the seven spirits who are before his throne.

> Then I heard a loud voice from the temple telling the seven angels, ‘Go and pour out on the earth the seven bowls of the wrath of God.’

Understanding “seven’s” representation of completeness supports allegorical hermeneutic within Revelation. The trials and tribulation produced by the seals, trumpets, and bowls represent a larger idea of complete trouble upon

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44 Ibid
earth. With this, the seven specific tribulations could perhaps be symbolic of thousands of plagues, troubles, and plights that go completely throughout the world.

Seven is not the only quantity that dispensationalism seems to take literally. Revelation 4:6 alludes to four creatures among the twenty-four elders:

Around the throne, and on each side of the throne, are four living creatures, full of eyes in front and behind.\textsuperscript{45}

In a symbolic approach, the number four is believed to signify “the world”.\textsuperscript{46} The creatures full of eyes all around may be a symbol for God's vision and sight over the world. A better understanding of “four’s” symbolic representation can be seen in Revelation 7:1:

After this I saw four angels standing at the four corners of earth, holding back the four winds of the earth so that no wind could blow on earth or sea or against any tree.\textsuperscript{47}

It only seems common practice to understand the world does not possess true corners as a cube or only four winds. Symbolically however, this verse could be understood as God having total control, through the four angels, over the world.

So what then is to be said about the number six? The number six is connected with a source of evil in the Bible when referring to the beast that is to rise out of the earth in Revelation 11:18:

This calls for wisdom: let anyone with understanding calculate the number of the beast, for it is the number of a person. Its number is six hundred and sixty-six.\textsuperscript{48}

But does our typical fear instinct upon hearing six-six-six hold any value? Symbolically in the Hebrew language, it does as six is representative of unrest:

When the number is repeated then it signifies an eternal quantity. For example 666 would signify eternal unrest.\textsuperscript{49}

Dispensationalists aren’t argumentative in understanding this biblical numbers meaning as it is blatantly stated by John. However, they do hold to a literal view that this number will be either transcribed on the right hand or forehead of followers. Symbolic hermeneutic may argue for an understanding of a different symbol or marking to be used instead of “666” if a physical marking is to even be used at all.

As previously discussed, the millennial kingdom to a dispensationalist is a literal one thousand year reign of Christ who is bodily on the earth. We have stated that the millennial kingdom’s one thousand years can also be

\textsuperscript{45} Ibid
\textsuperscript{46} Senir, Donals. The Catholic Study Bible. New York, NY. (1990)
taken symbolically as a “long period of time”. Justification for this symbolism comes from the representation of “1000” as an immense quantity or a multitude. Thus, this time of Christ’s reign, regardless of physical or spiritual, may not have been written to be understood as a literal one thousand years and instead represents an immense span of years. Some critiques of symbolic interpretation of “1000” argue that this number can also be seen as an eternal timespan, that which would not end. It does not seem proper to apply this version of interpretation to Revelation however as this “one thousand” year kingdom is said to come to an end multiple times in Revelation 20 so that the second death in the eternal hell can occur. Thus it seems best to understand “1000” years for the millennial kingdom as representing a multitude of years.

Chapter 3 – Cultural Influence of Dispensationalism in the United States

Vast amounts of works have been published offering critique of dispensationalism challenging a widely accepted evangelical system. There is much evidence demonstrating dispensationalism’s questionable use of scripture. As I have previously discussed, dispensationalists argue for a strict literal hermeneutic of scripture through the Bible. This literalism is also applied to Biblical prophecy which most scholars and theologians believe is best understood lightly with literalism and mostly by metaphoric concepts. Dispensationalists argue that metaphoric interpretation of Biblical prophecy is “spiritualizing” the scripture and a lack of understanding is taken. They further point out that all prophecy covering the first coming of Christ was literal so it must mean that the second coming will be literal too. This argument is lacking validity as Crenshaw has pointed out by composing “a review of prophecies concerning Christ, reveal that only 34 of the 97 (35%) were fulfilled literally.” Many theologians, including Schwertley attest to the fact that Biblical prophecies literal interpretation may be farfetched:

But if you read their books, scenes with bows, arrows, and horses become future battles with tanks, helicopters and airplanes. The mark of the beast becomes a computer chip or bar code. The locusts from the bottomless pit (Rev. 9) supposedly become attack helicopters, and so on. Are there any premillennial authors or commentators who believe that the beast from the sea with seven heads and ten horns (Rev. 13) is a literal creature?

Schwertley isn’t the only Biblical scholar to critique literalism of purported end time prophecy as Gane explains:

All conservative interpreters of the Bible believe that the Scriptures should be interpreted literally. But a literal interpretation of Scripture involves recognition of the symbolic nature of some passages.

52 Schwertley, B. The premillennial deception: Chilliasm examined in the light of Scripture. (1996)
Apocalyptic prophecy makes a considerable use of symbolism. Dispensationalists insist on giving a literal interpretation to passages that are clearly intended to be symbolic or allegorical. Biblical prophecy in Revelation understood by dispensationalism remains a problematic way at assessing such scripture. Although this may be apparent to Biblical scholars studying the Bible, laypeople and society in general have fallen victim to media’s dispensational attraction. One of the biggest influences of such thought has come through the *Left Behind* series by Tim LaHaye and Jerry B. Jenkins. In their bestselling book series, direct dispensationalist interpretation of Revelation is applied in a story describing a rapture event in which brings global insatiability and the rise of an antichrist figure. The main characters through the series become Christian converts who set out as the “Tribulation Force” to convert others and prepare for an impending tribulation.

Since the series release, they have enjoyed enormous success with many of the books reaching number one best seller in *New York Times*. The novels fulfill quick paced action that media and society have come to adore. Such success has led to numerous film production as well as spin off series being released. The series, although quenching the norms of mass-market fiction, was released at a time that reflected the views of millions of Americans.

However entertaining these depiction may be, they contain the same problems that has critiqued dispensationalists for years. A lecture at Duke University given by Dr. Michael Gorman detailed problems of the *Left Behind* series and its hermeneutic. The first point made is how the series treats the Bible as a puzzle that, once all the pieces are sorted together, shows some specific roadmap of events. Many of these “puzzle pieces” are taken out of context from specific portions of the Bible and placed where they are believed to be expected. Gorman summarizes this methodology by stating:

The method has sometimes been called biblical “hopscotch”, and the results is a patchwork quilt with scenes from Revelation as the most prominent and thematic aspect of the quilt. This misuse and improper reorganization of scripture alters the text in such way that it may not be understood in the specific context it was meant for. In this function, the authors were able to exploit Biblical prophecy to function how they wanted it too.

As does the series dispensational roots, it misunderstands Biblical prophecy to be literal. Again, books such as Revelation detailing apocalyptic events use heavy symbolic language. Applying a sort of documentary view to

53 Gane, E. *Is Israel still God’s chosen nation?* (1997)

Revelation is misguided and lacks the proper understanding of metaphoric language. This dangerous misuse of apocalyptic scripture allows the series to fulfill the mass-market fiction desires.

The setting of the series is a modern 19th century view. It imposes the ancient Biblical text to modern technologies depicting swords as guns and locusts as helicopters. The rapture is depicted as people bursting out of thin air with their clothes being their only worldly remnant left behind, neatly folded in a pile where they once stood. The series constantly assumes that humanity is on the threshold of rapture and the end of days. This driving thought creates an escapist tone where the primary reason for conversion becomes fear such to evade the impending tribulation. Theologian Harvey Cox has even suggested that:

> It is impossible to read the series without getting the impression that a certain lip-licking anticipation of all the blood is involved.55

Any thought of pacifism or unification is seen as satanic and functions as the antichrists only form of gaining control.

The theologian Craig Koester has critiqued the dispensational nature of the Left Behind series thoroughly. He notes that the series defines prophecy as “history written in advance”.56 This fundamental flaw resides in literal interpretation of purported Biblical prophecy. This may be evident in the promises made by God that are perhaps not so much predications as they are manifestations of God’s commitment to humanity:

> The dispensationalist system patches together parts of Scripture in a way that alters the meaning that verses had in their original contexts. For example, the system maintains that God fulfilled prophecies up to Dan 9:26, then stopped the clock for at least nineteen centuries. Next, God is to fulfill 1 Thess 4:17 by rapturing the faithful; then he is to resume the script at Dan 9:27 as the tribulation begins.57

This system severely alters the context of the scripture.

The Left Behind series is not the first of its sort to alter biblical text for mass media. Hal Lindsey’s The Late Great Planet Earth calls into question the same problematic hermeneutic of dispensational theologies. Bart Ehrman noted that Lindsey understood the book of Revelation in a dispensational sense:

> The world was heading for an apocalyptic crisis of catastrophic proportions, and the inerrant words of scripture could be read to show what, how, and when it would happen.58

As I have exhausted through scholarly biblical critique, this literal hermeneutic of purported biblical prophecies lays down many dangerous assumptions.

56 Koester, Craig. Revelation and the Left behind Novels. (2005)
57 Koester, Craig. Revelation and the Left behind Novels. (2005)
58 Ehrman, Bart D. Misquoting Jesus. (2009)
It seems all too relevant that the *Left Behind* series and Hal Lindsey’s *The Late Great Planet Earth* are best understood purely as fiction based upon expounded literal views of Revelation. The same problems dispensationalism faces are transcribed into the novels and films. For those lacking the understanding of purported Biblical Prophecy, Hollywood’s depiction of such events raise a problematic hermeneutical lens that many may adapt as “fact”. For this reason, it is crucial to critique and challenge the roots of such productions and assess if they hold true the Biblical context meant to be read.

**Closing Remarks**

The use of Revelation within dispensational theologies results in a problematic assessment of purported Biblical prophecy. A literal hermeneutic fails to acknowledge metaphoric Scripture, in turn, causing the context to be understood in ways it may have not been meant for. Literalism in the Book of Revelation uses the Scripture as a sort of map through end time events. It does not seem reasonable to assume this based on arguments involving discussion of the rapture, tribulation, millennial kingdom, and numerology in Revelation. The organization of Revelation may in fact not represent a systematic step by step plan for the events of this purported prophecy. In this metaphoric case, the Revelatory events also may not occur exactly as they are written, instead representing an idea, theme, or motif.

Through critical biblical critique, it seems to be shown that dispensational thought twists Revelation and its purported biblical prophecies in a problematic and out-of-context way of understanding the scripture. The dangers that have arisen out of this thought have produced mass media biblical fiction that many may view as the way these purported prophecies are to be fulfilled. Individuals looking to study *Revelation* from a scholarly perspective should take into account this problematic literal hermeneutic employed by dispensationalism as they assess their own beliefs.

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