

**NEW EVANGELICAL HERMENEUTICS AND ESCHATOLOGY**  
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**Recent Trends in Evangelicalism and Evangelical Hermeneutics**

Since the 1970s evangelicalism and evangelical hermeneutics have undergone radical changes, changes that have not happened without affecting interpretation of the Bible's prophetic teachings. I have elaborated on the changes in *Evangelical Hermeneutics: The New Versus the Old*.<sup>1</sup> Here we can only offer a sample of some of the changes.

- David F. Wells has written, "It was clear to us, even in 1975, that Evangelicalism was about to change, the core consensus was beginning to weaken, strategic coherence was beginning to disappear, and that in the absence of these things we could anticipate seeing many new ad hoc definitions as to what Evangelicalism was and many new and ad hoc silences when it was not what it was supposed to be."<sup>2</sup>
- Iain Murray specifies the general time period of evangelicalism's slippage: "We have seen that the new evangelicalism, launched with such promise, had lost its way in the United States by the late 1960s."<sup>3</sup> Later he notes regarding evangelicalism's attempt to attain academic respectability, "[T]he academic approach to Scripture treats the divine element—for all practical purposes—as non-existent. History shows that when evangelicals allow that approach their teaching will sooner or later begin to look little different from that of liberals."<sup>4</sup>
- What Wells and Murray have observed was substantiated just last month on November 19 when the Evangelical Theological Society membership refused to dismiss two leading open theists from its membership. That Society is rapidly returning to the theological stance of the nonevangelical society from which it separated in 1949. Evangelicalism is rapidly losing its distinctiveness.
- After reading recent evangelical works on hermeneutics, one of my students expressed his puzzlement over the definition of the word *meaning*. That puzzlement is no mystery because recent evangelical writers have offered at least eight definitions of *meaning* when

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\* Since CDs were burned well in advance of the meeting, the wording of this presentation may differ from what appears on the CD.

<sup>1</sup> Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2002.

<sup>2</sup> Foreword to *The Eclipse of the Reformation in the Evangelical Church*, ed. Gary L. W. Johnson and R. Fowler White (Phillipsburg, N.J.: Presbyterian and Reformed, 2001) xix.

<sup>3</sup> Iain H. Murray, *Evangelicalism Divided: A Record of Crucial Change in the Years 1950 to 2000* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 2000) 51.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 185.

- it comes to explaining what the Bible means.<sup>5</sup>
- Probably the single most devastating change in hermeneutics has been a widespread endorsement of the step of *preunderstanding* at the beginning of the exegetical process. It has dispensed with the goal of a traditional grammatical-historical approach for achieving objectivity in letting the text speak for itself, and substituted in its place a goal of defending what an interpreter thinks a passage should mean. Such a marked shift toward subjectivity has had dramatic effects on traditional principles of literal interpretation and has opened the door for the birth of a number of new sub-“isms” under the umbrella of evangelicalism.<sup>6</sup> So radical has been the effects of preunderstanding that a well-known evangelical scholar, who must remain unnamed, has left his position at an evangelical seminary and turned in his ministerial credentials because he could no longer embrace traditional evangelical propositional truths exegetically derived from Scripture.<sup>7</sup>

The flippant way many evangelicals have forsaken the traditional principle of single meaning illustrates the impact of incorporating preunderstanding into the exegetical process. In the nineteenth century, Terry wrote, “A fundamental principle in grammatico-historical exposition is that the words and sentences can have but one significance in one and the same connection. The moment we neglect this principle we drift out upon a sea of uncertainty and conjecture.”<sup>8</sup> In contrast, evangelical Grant Osborne in his recent work on hermeneutics advocates double meanings in cases of single words.<sup>9</sup> In fact, he cites the Gospel of John as famous “for its widespread use of double meaning.”<sup>10</sup> Such a shift in principles of interpretation has had a huge impact on evangelical interpretation and its impact will continue to grow if allowed to continue.

An illustration of how preunderstanding has begotten a number of new “isms” within evangelicalism is the existence of the movement of Progressive Dispensationalism [PD]. Blaising and Bock affirm that PD has resulted from the hermeneutical shift among evangelicals:

. . . Evangelical grammatical-historical interpretation was . . . broadening in the mid-twentieth century to include the field of biblical theology. Grammatical analysis expanded to include developments in literary study, particularly in the study of genre, or

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<sup>5</sup>See Thomas, *Evangelical Hermeneutics* 23-24, 26, 28, for the eight definitions and their sources.

<sup>6</sup>*Ibid.*, 27-31.

<sup>7</sup>Some time in the early 1980s a major evangelical publisher’s representative responded negatively to my suggestion of a new work on grammatical-historical principles because of a shift in evangelical hermeneutics that I had not embraced. In personal conversation a little later, Walter Kaiser divulged a similar experience when he was told by a major evangelical publisher that his proposed work on hermeneutics would not sell because it did not represent the recent hermeneutical trend among evangelicals.

<sup>8</sup>M. S. Terry, *Biblical Hermeneutics: A Treatise on the Interpretation of the Old and New Testaments* (1885; reprint, Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1947) 205.

<sup>9</sup>G. R. Osborne, *Hermeneutical Spiral: A comprehensive Introduction to Biblical Interpretation* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1991) 88-89.

<sup>10</sup>*Ibid.*, 89.

literary form, and rhetorical structure. Historical interpretation came to include a reference to the historical and cultural context of individual literary pieces for their overall interpretation. *And by the late 1980s, evangelicals became more aware of the problem of the interpreter's historical context and traditional preunderstanding of the text being interpreted.* These developments . . . have opened up new vistas for discussion which were not considered by earlier interpreters, including classical and many revised dispensationalists. *These are developments which have led to what is now called "progressive dispensationalism."*<sup>11</sup>

One of the areas in which PD has departed from traditional grammatical-historical principles lies in its notoriety for violating the traditional hermeneutical principle of single meaning. Its preunderstanding that it has to find a midpoint between dispensationalism and covenant theology, causes its advocates to find multiple fulfillments of a single OT passage. They propose that not only national Israel of the future will fulfill her OT prophecies, but also the church is currently fulfilling those same prophecies. What PD calls "complementary hermeneutics" clearly violates traditional principles of literal interpretation.<sup>12</sup>

Time forbids that we dwell further on recent general trends in evangelical hermeneutics. The temptation to delve into how the new hermeneutics has furnished opportunities for Open Theism, evangelical feminism, the new perspective on Paul, and other recently developed movements within the evangelical camp is great. Suffice it to say that each one stems from a preunderstanding that in most cases is a response to current developments in the secular culture of which we are a part. In other words, evangelicals are now practicing a type of hermeneutics that has been common among nonevangelicals for over a half century, a type called reader-response criticism.

We must turn now to the other part of our assigned topic of relating the new evangelical hermeneutics to eschatology.

### **New Evangelical Hermeneutics and Eschatology**

In considering the impact of recent hermeneutical trends on eschatology, we would like to cover several areas: the book of Revelation must, of course, come first, and then PD, theonomy, and the NT use of the OT.

#### **The Book of Revelation and Apocalyptic Genre**

**The genre of Revelation.** Genre analyses divide the Bible books into groups based on comparisons with extra-biblical literature from the periods immediately before, during, and after

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<sup>11</sup>Craig A. Blaising and Darrell L. Bock, *Progressive Dispensationalism* (Wheaton, Ill.: Victor, 1993) 35-36. [emphasis added]

<sup>12</sup>In a public dialogue between Robert Saucy, the father of PD, and myself about two years ago, I represented dispensationalism and he represented PD. I spent my whole allotted time on the subject of hermeneutics, but his only mention of the subject came when he disclaimed responsibility for what some of his PD "children" were advocating regarding a change in hermeneutics being at the root of PD.

the composition of the NT. Literary features such as structure, style, content, and function are included in these comparisons.<sup>13</sup> Blomberg identifies the categories of general style to which Revelation has been compared as prophecy, apocalyptic, and epistle.<sup>14</sup> To these may be added edict, to which Aune has recently likened the messages of Revelation 2–3,<sup>15</sup> and drama, for which Blevins has argued.<sup>16</sup>

No consensus exists as to a precise definition of “genre,”<sup>17</sup> so discussions attempting to classify portions of the NT, including Revelation, are at best vague. A few general observations regarding proposed answers to the question of “which genre?” are in order, however. The epistolary element is clearly present at certain points of the Apocalypse, such as in Rev 1:4-5a which has a customary epistolary salutation and in Rev 22:21 with its normal epistolary benediction. Yet so much of the book is clearly of another character that this hardly suffices as an overall category. Aune’s case for likening chapters 2–3 to a royal or imperial edict has merit too, but he nowhere claims that this applies to the whole book. Blevins’ argument for seeing Revelation as a form of Greek tragic drama provides interesting historical background derived from the Greek theater at Ephesus, but hardly qualifies as an overall literary type.

A recent trend among some scholars has been to view Revelation as primarily apocalyptic genre. This complicates the problem of definition even further because, in addition to disagreement about what constitutes genre, uncertainty prevails regarding a definition of “apocalyptic.”<sup>18</sup> Aune launches an effort to solve this problem by formulating a definition based on the Book of Revelation.<sup>19</sup> This is appropriate because the term “apocalyptic” arose from the first word of the Greek text of Revelation, *apokalypsis* (“revelation”).<sup>20</sup> Yet such an effort prejudices the case in favor of categorizing Revelation in a certain way by assuming an answer to the question under investigation and not allowing for the book’s uniqueness. Revelation certainly has features in common with the *Shepherd of Hermas* and other works of this type, including its

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<sup>13</sup>D. E. Aune, *The New Testament in Its Literary Environment* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1987) 13.

<sup>14</sup>Blomberg, “New Testament Genre Criticism for the 1990s,” *Themelios* 15/2 (January-February 1990): 45.

<sup>15</sup>D. E. Aune, “The Form and Function of the Proclamations to the Seven Churches (Revelation 2–3),” *NTS* 36/2 (Apr 1990): 183.

<sup>16</sup>James L. Blevins, “The Genre of Revelation,” *RevExp* 77/3 (Summer 1980): 393-408.

<sup>17</sup>David E. Aune, “The Apocalypse of John and the Problem of Genre,” *Semeia* 36 (1986): 66.

<sup>18</sup>Aune, “The Apocalypse” 67-91. As for terminology, a distinction between “apocalypses” (as literature), “apocalyptic eschatology” (as a world view), and “apocalypticism” (as a socio-religious movement) appears to have wide acceptance among specialists in this area of study (Theodore N. Swanson, “The Apocalyptic Scriptures,” *J.Dharma* 8 [July 1982]: 314; James C. VanderKam, “Recent Studies in Apocalyptic,” *Word and World* 4 [Winter 1984]: 71-72; Aune, “The Apocalypse” 67), though acceptance is by no means universal (VanderKam, “Recent Studies” 73; Adela Yarbro Collins, “Reading the Book of Revelation in the Twentieth Century,” *Int* 40/3 [July 1986]: 235-38). The purpose of this study is not to advance proposed distinctions in definition, but to comment on the literary result. The socio-religious movement that produced the Apocalypse is the one begun by Jesus and continued by the apostles, not the apocalyptic spirit that developed among the Jews following the abuses of Antiochus Epiphanes (contra Swanson, “Apocalyptic Scriptures” 321-27). Within this framework apocalyptic eschatology cannot be distinguished from prophetic eschatology as, for example, being more pessimistic (contra *ibid.*, 314-17). The outlook of the two is no different. The brief evaluation here elaborates on the literary factors of Revelation as compared to other “apocalypses.”

<sup>19</sup>Aune, “The Apocalypse” 86-91.

<sup>20</sup>David E. Aune, *Prophecy in Early Christianity and the Ancient Mediterranean World* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983) 108; *idem*, *The New Testament* 226-27.

extensive use of symbolism, vision as the major means of revelation, focus on the end of the current age and the inauguration of the age to come, a dualism with God and Satan as leaders, a spiritual order determining the course of history, and pessimism about man's ability to change the progress of events.<sup>21</sup>

But it also differs distinctly from everything else in this class. Other apocalypses are generally pseudonymous, but Revelation is not. The epistolary framework of Revelation also sets it apart from the works that are similar in other respects. Other writings lack the repeated admonitions for moral compliance that Revelation has (2:5, 16, 21, 22; 3:3, 19). Revelation is not as pessimistic about the present as other works in this category. In others, the coming of the Messiah is exclusively future, but in Revelation He has already come and laid the groundwork for his future victory through His redemptive death.<sup>22</sup>

Most distinctive of all, however, is the fact that this book calls itself a prophecy (1:3; 22:7, 10, 18, 19). Its contents fully justify this self-claim.<sup>23</sup> Of the thirty-one characteristics that have been cited in attempts to define apocalyptic,<sup>24</sup> all when properly understood could apply to prophecy as well, with the possible exception of pseudonymity (which does not apply to Revelation). Alleged differences between the Apocalypse and generally accepted works of prophecy often rest upon inadequate interpretations of the former.

Craig Blaising commits a classic blunder in reviewing my comments about the genre of Revelation. In referring to my words in *Revelation 1–7* (Moody Press, 1992), he writes, “He [Thomas] observes John’s own indication that the work is prophecy (Rev. 1:3; 22:7, 10, 18, 19) and concludes that the genre should be classified as prophetic, not apocalyptic (or some combination genre in which apocalyptic is included) since ‘it does not allow for the preeminence of the book’s prophetic character’ (p. 28). But this is contradicted by his earlier statement, ‘Of the thirty-one characteristics that have been cited in attempts to define apocalyptic, all when properly understood could apply to prophecy as well, with the possible exception of pseudonymity . . .’ (p. 25).”<sup>25</sup> Blaising has dreamed up a contradiction. He has failed to notice or chosen to omit several items in the context of the latter quoted statement. First, he fails to note that the sentence he quotes comes from a paragraph that is *denying* Revelation’s apocalyptic genre, but he uses the quote to *prove* apocalyptic genre.<sup>26</sup> Second, he fails to notice or chooses to

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<sup>21</sup>Robert H. Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*, NIC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977) 19-23; Paul J. Achtemeier, “An Apocalyptic Shift in Early Christian Tradition: Reflections on Some Canonical Evidence,” *CBQ* 45/2 (Apr 1983): 232. Ladd is too narrow in his statement that “the central element in apocalyptic is the glorious second coming of Jesus Christ, who will raise the dead, judge persons and usher in the glories of the Age to Come” (George E. Ladd, “New Testament Apocalyptic,” *RevExp* 78/2 [Spring 1981]: 205).

<sup>22</sup>Leon Morris, *The Revelation of St. John*, TNTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1969) 23-25; Mounce, *Revelation* 23-25; Blevins, “Genre” 393; Lowell J. Satre, “Interpreting the Book of Revelation,” *WW* 4/1 (Winter 1984): 60-61.

<sup>23</sup>Paul Feine, Johannes Behm, and Werner Georg Kümmel, *Introduction to the New Testament*, trans., A. J. Mattill, Jr. (Nashville: Abingdon, 1966) 324; Morris, *Revelation* 23.

<sup>24</sup>David Hellholm, “The Problem of Apocalyptic Genre and the Apocalypse of John,” *Society of Biblical Literature 1982 Seminar Papers*, Kent Harold Richards, ed. (Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1982) 164-65.

<sup>25</sup>Craig A. Blaising, “Premillennialism,” in *Three Views on the Millennium and Beyond*, ed. Darrell L. Bock [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1999] 209 n. 72.

<sup>26</sup>Robert L. Thomas, *Revelation 1–7: An Exegetical Commentary*, ed. Kenneth Barker (Chicago: Moody, 1992), 25.

omit any reference to the immediately preceding paragraph which points out further distinctions between Revelation and nonbiblical apocalyptic works besides the thirty-one mentioned in the quote.<sup>27</sup> Third, he fails to notice or chooses to omit my conclusion in the larger section from which he extracts the quote. My conclusion is this: “It may be concluded . . . that the literary genre of inspired writings was not the choice of the human author, but was an inevitable result of the manner in which God chose to reveal His message to the prophet. This, of course, distinguishes them from uninspired but similar works whose writers did, in fact, choose a particular genre.”<sup>28</sup>

Without pursuing details of that discussion further, I have concluded that “apocalyptic” does not pertain to the type of literature in Revelation. Instead, it describes the direct-revelatory manner in which God gave the book to John. He inspired writers of the Gospels and Acts in one way, the epistle writers in another way, and the writer of Revelation in still another way. In general, when it comes to books of the Bible, *genre* applies most specifically to the manner of direct revelation, not to a type of literature. Writers of secular works chose the literary style that best suited their purpose, but biblical writers had no choice but to write in the manner in which God revealed data to them. Like all inspired writings, the spiritual gift of prophecy was the medium through which the message came to the prophet and through him to his readers. We therefore conclude that Revelation belongs to a prophetic, not an apocalyptic, genre.

**Genre’s effect on interpretation.** Hermeneutical guidelines for interpreting Revelation correspond at least partially to an interpreter’s decision about the book’s literary genre. To be sure, various interpretive approaches to the book existed long before the recent attention to apocalyptic genre, but most of the theories have adopted that genre to promote human agendas more stringently.

In promoting the preterist approach (i.e., the bulk of John’s prophecies were fulfilled in the first century, shortly after he wrote them), Gentry writes, “*Revelation is a highly figurative book that we cannot approach with a simple straightforward literalism.*”<sup>29</sup> To be sure, one must interpret Revelation in light of its historical setting, but to justify a nonliteral interpretation, one must assume an apocalyptic genre in which the language only faintly reflects actual events. Specifically, to see words about Christ’s second coming in Rev 1:7 as fulfilled in A.D. 70 when the temple was destroyed<sup>30</sup> necessitates allowing a particular genre to override normal rules of interpretation. In seeking to justify his postmillennial approach to the book, Gentry characterizes Revelation as “apocalyptic drama” clothed in “poetic hyperbole.”<sup>31</sup> On the other

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 29. Blaising exemplifies an all-too-often tendency of recent evangelical scholars in practicing superficial scholarship. They attain their scholarly reputations because of agreements with nonevangelical scholars, not because of the thoroughness of their research. Unfortunately, they often do not check the claims of their nonevangelical counterparts. Rather, they slavishly copy their conclusions.

<sup>29</sup> K. L. Gentry, Jr., “A Preterist View of Revelation,” *Four Views on the Book of Revelation*, ed. C. M. Pate (:Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998) 38.

<sup>30</sup> E.g., David Chilton, *The Days of Vengeance* (Fort Worth, Tex.: Dominion, ;1987) 63-64.

<sup>31</sup> Gentry, “Preterist View” 38.

hand, understanding Revelation to be primarily a prophecy allows for a literal interpretation of 1:7 as well as the rest of the book. If Revelation is primarily a prophecy, it can be interpreted like prophecies throughout the rest of the Bible, that is, according to grammatical-historical principles.

The timeless-symbolic or idealist approach to Revelation, most commonly associated with amillennialism, has the book representing the eternal conflict of good and evil in every age, usually in reference to the particular age in which the interpreter lives.<sup>32</sup> It sees the book as not referring to specific events but expressing the basic principles according to which God acts throughout history.<sup>33</sup> Sam Hamstra represents the idealist view as follows:

The message carried by these visions is simple: While at this moment the children of God suffer in the world where evil appears to have the upper hand, God is sovereign and Jesus Christ has won the victory. Yes, you suffer as a resident of this world that bears the imprint of Adam's sin. Yes, you experience persecution as a light-bearer of the gospel, but God the Father will preserve and protect you as well as each one of his children so not one will be lost. . . .

Scholars describe this pictorial presentation of truth as characterized by bold colors, vivid images, unique symbols, a simple story line, a hero and a happy ending. . . . You approach apocalyptic literature differently than you would a letter or one of the Gospels.<sup>34</sup>

The idealist view is correct in attributing to God certain principles of action that govern His dealings with the world in every era, but it is blatantly inadequate in denying the prophetic genre of Revelation. Fulfillment of the events predicted in the book, most notably the personal return of Jesus Christ to earth, is not found in a repetitive cycle that marks each generation, but will at some future point be *historical* events in the fullest sense of the word.

The idealist approach relates closely to a proclivity of recent evangelical hermeneutics toward contextualizing in interpretation. *Contextualization* is a term coined in a 1972 publication of the World Council of Churches.<sup>35</sup> It advocates assigning meaning to the text of Scripture based on cultural and sociopolitical factors in contemporary society rather than on the grammatical-historical method of exegesis. It inevitably leads to substituting one or more of many suggested applications for the one correct interpretation of Scripture.<sup>36</sup> Such a practice advocates translating the first-century rhetorical situation into contemporary meanings that may be diametrically opposed to the original meaning.

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<sup>32</sup>M. C. Tenney, *Interpreting Revelation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1957) 143.

<sup>33</sup>R. H. Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*, NICNT (1977) 43.

<sup>34</sup>S. Hamstra, Jr., "An Idealist View of Revelation," in *Four Views on the Book of Revelation* 96-97.

<sup>35</sup>*Theological Education Fund, Ministry in Context: The Third Mandate Programme of the Theological Education Fund* (1970-77) (Bromley, Kent, U.K.: New Life, 1972); cf. G. Fackre, "Evangelical Hermeneutics," *Int* 43/2 (April 1989):128.

<sup>36</sup>See chapters 4, 7, and 14 of Thomas, *Evangelical Hermeneutics*, for more discussion of contextualization.

That, of course, violates traditional principles of literal interpretation, which dictate that “meaning” in the original setting (i.e., interpretation) and “significance” for the present situation (i.e., application) must be kept separate if literature is to have any coherence. To apply Scripture carelessly, without regard for its meaning, is to abuse it for the sake of self-generated crusades. Without a well-defined interpretation in the setting of the author, control of application vanishes and the significance for any given situation becomes a matter of individual whim.<sup>37</sup>

Only the futurist approach to Revelation accepts the book’s self-claim of being a prophecy and interprets it literally. In embracing the premillennial return of Christ, it utilizes a normal hermeneutical pattern of interpretation based on the prophetic style, views the book as focusing on the last period(s) of world history, and outlines the various events and their relationships to one another. Blomberg’s opinion that an “exclusively prophetic interpretation usually insists on an impossibly literal hermeneutic which is therefore inevitably applied inconsistently”<sup>38</sup> is to be expected from one whose preunderstanding in approaching the book does not align with consistent futurism.

Most preterists and idealists interpret Revelation literally at times and see some futurist aspects in Revelation, but at the same time create hermeneutical confusion. Such “eclectic” hermeneutical approaches to Revelation abound. A combination of idealist and futurist schemes is one example. Such a concept proposes that apocalypses spoke of the historical context in which they were written and can be transferred to new situations of later generations time after time, with one final reference to real end-time tribulation. Idealist Beale typifies this hybrid approach to the book:

A more viable, modified version of the idealist perspective would acknowledge a final consummation in salvation and judgment. Perhaps it would be best to call this . . . view “eclecticism.” Accordingly, no specific prophesied historical events are discerned in the book, except for the final coming of Christ to deliver and judge and to establish the final form of the kingdom in a consummated new creation—though there are a few exceptions to this rule.<sup>39</sup>

This type of analysis satisfies itself with general conclusions and makes details of the text almost useless, since they are nonhistorical.<sup>40</sup>

Beale is not alone in his use of eclectic hermeneutics. Others who do the same include G. R. Beasley-Murray, Robert H. Mounce, Leon Morris, and G. Eldon Ladd.<sup>41</sup> Leland Ryken’s

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<sup>37</sup>W. C. Kaiser, Jr., “Legitimate Hermeneutics,” in *Inerrancy* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1979), 122; N. L. Geisler, “Does Purpose Determine Meaning?” *WTJ* 51/1 (spring 1989):153-55.

<sup>38</sup>Blomberg, “Genre Criticism” 46.

<sup>39</sup>G. K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999) 48.

<sup>40</sup>H. S. Kvanig, “The Relevance of the Biblical Visions of the End Time,” *Horizons in Biblical Theology* 11/1 (June 1989): 49-50.

<sup>41</sup>For documentation on these four, see Thomas, *Evangelical Hermeneutics* 332-33, 347.



eclecticism brings him to combine four approaches to Revelation—the preterist, the continuous historical, the futurist, and the idealist.<sup>42</sup> C. Marvin Pate combines preterism, idealism, and futurism because of his “already/not yet” preunderstanding of the text.<sup>43</sup> All those men would insist that exclusive literal interpretation in Revelation is impossible because of its apocalyptic genre. They would claim that eclectic hermeneutics are necessary because the text of Revelation demands it.

At a meeting of the Whitefield Fraternal in San Jose, California last January, I was privileged to engage in a dialogue with idealist Dennis E. Johnson of Westminster Seminary California, whose commentary on Revelation was released recently.<sup>44</sup> In defending a literal hermeneutical approach to the book, I called attention to his eclectic approach, which he admitted. His response was the usual: at times the text makes literalism impossible. He called attention to several passages in the book that could not be literal. He pointed to several interpretations in my commentary that were allegedly nonliteral.

(1) In my commentary I interpret “the seven spirits which are before the throne” to be the Holy Spirit. He asked how that could be literal. I responded by referring him to Zech 4:1-10, on which I feel that terminology is based. Since Revelation contains so many OT allusions (278 verses out of Revelation’s 404 verses have such), a literal interpretation of Revelation must take into account figures of speech derived from the OT.<sup>45</sup> Literal interpretation, of course, allows for figures of speech when the biblical text makes figurative language a clear option.

(2) He also asked how the description of Christ as having a sword proceeding from His mouth could be literal (cf. Rev 1:16; 2:16; 19:15, 21). Again, Revelation’s heavy dependence on the OT is the answer. In one of His Servant Songs, Isaiah wrote, “And He has made My mouth like a sharp sword; in the shadow of His hand He has concealed Me” (Isa 49:2a). Psalm 57:4b reads, “Even the sons of men, whose teeth are spears and arrows, and their tongue a sharp sword.” Similarly, Ps 64:3 says, “Who have sharpened their tongue like a sword. They aimed bitter speech as their arrow.” Obvious figures of speech in the OT carry over into the language of Revelation as figurative language that is commonly recognized in literal interpretation.

(3) Then Professor Johnson brought up the fire that proceeds from the mouths of the two witnesses (Rev 11:5) as a situation that defied literal interpretation. Speaking of his deliverance by the LORD, David said, “Smoke went up out of His nostrils, and fire from His mouth devoured; coals were kindled by it” (2 Sam 22:9; cf. also Ps 18:8). God’s promise to Jeremiah was, “Because you have spoken this word, behold, I am making My words in your mouth fire and this people wood, and it will consume them” (Jer 5:14). Because of OT usage, language of this sort in Revelation falls easily into the realm of figures of speech that are allowed by literal interpretation.

It is true that allegorical interpretations were assigned to Revelation long before the invention of terms such as “apocalyptic” and “genre,” but new evangelical hermeneutics have put

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<sup>42</sup>Leland Ryken, *Words of Life: A Literary Introduction to the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1987) 144-45.

<sup>43</sup>C. M. Pate, “A Progressive Dispensationalism View of Revelation,” in *Four Views on the Book of Revelation* 173-75.

<sup>44</sup>*Triumph of the Lamb: A Commentary on Revelation*. Phillipsburg, N.J.: P & R, 2001.

<sup>45</sup>For a full discussion of “the seven spirits,” see Thomas, *Revelation 1–7* 66-68.

those relatively new terms to use in affording their nonliteral interpretations a new scholarly sophistication.

### **Progressive Dispensationalism**

New evangelical hermeneutics have opened wide doors for PD in implementing its preunderstanding and its quest to find a midpoint between Covenant Theology and Dispensationalism. Already we have cited PD's endorsement of new hermeneutical principles that automatically separate the movement from traditional literal interpretation. Now it is appropriate to compare the hermeneutics of PD with specific traditional principles.

**The principle of objectivity.** In the nineteenth century Milton Terry's long-recognized work on grammatical-historical hermeneutics said, "We must not study them [i.e., the Scriptures] in the light of modern systems of divinity, but should aim rather to place ourselves in the position of the sacred writers, and study to obtain the impression their words would naturally have made upon the minds of the first readers. . . ."46 Traditional principles strongly emphasize the importance of letting the text speak for itself without imposing on it preconceived ideas of what it ought to teach.

Leaders in the PD movement pointedly advocate the opposite. For them one's biblical theology and other elements of preunderstanding become the first step of interpretation.<sup>47</sup> If one approaches a passage knowing what he wants to find, he arms himself to defend his preconception against anything in the text that might change it. An interpretative method that must defend a preunderstanding yields results far different from one that impartially approaches Scripture with the question, "What does this passage teach?"

Blaising and Bock write, "Each of us has our own way of seeing, a grid for understanding, that impacts what we expect to see in the text, the questions we ask of it, and thus the answer we get."<sup>48</sup> They apparently agree with Dan McCartney and Charles Clayton—and they are correct—that preunderstanding, not interpretive methodology, determines the result of interpretation when following new evangelical principles of interpretation.<sup>49</sup>

Such prominence given to preunderstanding by PD is obviously diametrically opposed to principles of traditional grammatical-historical interpretation.

**The principle of historical interpretation.** Traditionally, the historical dimension in interpretation has referred to the historical setting of the text's origin. As Terry expresses it, "The interpreter should, therefore, endeavour to take himself from the present and to transport

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<sup>46</sup>M. S. Terry, *Biblical Hermeneutics: A Treatise on the Interpretation of the Old and New Testaments* (1885; reprint, Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1947) 595.

<sup>47</sup>E.g., C. A. Blaising and D. L. Bock, "Dispensationalism, Israel and the Church: Assessment and Dialogue," in *Dispensationalism, Israel, and the Church: The Search for Definition* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992) 380; idem, *Progressive Dispensationalism* 58-61.

<sup>48</sup>Blaising and Bock, *Progressive Dispensationalism* 59.

<sup>49</sup>D. McCartney and C. Clayton, *Let the Reader Understand: A Guide to Interpreting and Applying the Bible* (Wheaton: Victor, 1944) 65.

himself into the historical position of an author, look through his eyes, note his surroundings, feel with his heart, and catch his emotion. Herein we note the import of the term *grammatico-historical* interpretation.”<sup>50</sup>

In contrast, Bock advocates a multilayered reading of the text that results in a “complementary” reading (or meaning) that adds to the original meaning determined by the text’s original setting. The “complementary” perspective views the text from the standpoint of later events, not events connected with the text’s origin.<sup>51</sup> He also proposes a third layer of reading, that of the entire biblical canon.<sup>52</sup> In other words, he sees three possible interpretations of a single text, only one of which pertains to the text’s original historical setting. He calls this a historical-grammatical-literary reading of the text.<sup>53</sup> He notes that “such a hermeneutic produces layers of sense and specificity for a text, as the interpreter moves from considering the near context to more distant ones.”<sup>54</sup>

By thus ignoring the way the original historical setting “freezes” the meaning of a text, Bock concludes that textual meaning is dynamic, not static—ever changing through the addition of new meanings.<sup>55</sup> For PD, “historical” has apparently come to incorporate not just the situation of the original text but also ongoing conditions throughout the history of the text’s interpretation.<sup>56</sup>

According to traditional hermeneutical principles, such “bending” by PD is impossible to justify because the historical dimension fixes the meaning of a given passage and does not allow it to keep gaining new senses as interpretation of the passage comes into new settings.

**The principle of single meaning.** Single meaning is a principle that, when violated, brings evangelicals very close to deconstructionism and postmodernism. To restate the principle in the words of Ramm, “But here we must remember the old adage: ‘Interpretation is one, application is many.’ This means that there is only one meaning to a passage of Scripture which is determined by careful study.”<sup>57</sup> Deconstructionism and Postmodernism allow for multiple interpretations of a single passage, as many interpretations as there are interpreters. Everyone is right, and nobody wrong. PD has not gone that far yet, but with its allowance for multiple meanings of a single passage, it is well on its way.

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<sup>50</sup>Terry, *Biblical Hermeneutics* 231. [emphasis in the original]

<sup>51</sup>D. L. Bock, “The Son of David and the Saints’ Task: The Hermeneutics of Initial Fulfillment,” *BSac* 150/600 (October-December 1993):445.

<sup>52</sup>*Ibid.*, 445 n. 9. Blaising and Bock elsewhere call the three levels of reading the historical-exegetical, the biblical-theological, and the canonical-systematic (*Progressive Dispensationalism* 100-101).

<sup>53</sup>Bock, “The Son of David” 447.

<sup>54</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>55</sup>D. L. Bock, “Current Messianic Activity and Old Testament Davidic Promise: Dispensationalism, Hermeneutics, and New Testament Fulfillment,” *Trinity Journal* 15 NS (1994):71; cf. Blaising and Bock, *Progressive Dispensationalism* 64.

<sup>56</sup>Blaising and Bock, *Progressive Dispensationalism* 29-30.

<sup>57</sup>Bernard Ramm, *Protestant Biblical Interpretation: A Textbook of Hermeneutics*, 3d rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2970) 113.

PD does not limit a passage to a single meaning when it allows for later complementary additions in meaning, which additions of necessity alter the original sense conveyed by a passage.<sup>58</sup> Such later additions are in view when Blaising and Bock write, “There also is such a thing as complementary aspects of meaning, where an additional angle on the text reveals an additional element of its message or a fresh way of relating the parts of a text’s message.”<sup>59</sup> In part, Bock admits this characteristics of his hermeneutics:

Does the expansion of meaning entail a change of meaning? . . . This is an important question for those concerned about consistency within interpretation. The answer is both yes and no. On the one hand, to add to the revelation of a promise is to introduce “change” to it through addition.<sup>60</sup>

He tries to justify this change by calling it revelatory progress,<sup>61</sup> but revelatory progress speaks of new passages with new meanings, not new passages that change meanings of older passages. Progress in divine revelation is quite apparent in tracing chronologically through the books of the Old and New Testaments, but “progress” only in the sense of adding to what has already been revealed, not in the sense of changing the meaning of previous revelation. To change the substance of something already written is not “progress”; it is “alteration” that raises questions about the credibility of a text’s original meaning.

All in all, PD’s complementary hermeneutics clash sharply with traditional grammatical-historical principles that deny the possibility of a passage’s having multiple meanings. It is an example of anachronistic hermeneutics to read NT revelation back into the context of the OT under the banner of grammatical-historical methodology.

**The principle of *sensus plenior* (“fuller meaning”).** Violation of the single-meaning principle leads easily to PD’s violation of the *sensus plenior* principle. To find a sense fuller than the grammatical-historical meaning of a passage clearly enters the realm of allegorical interpretation. Terry strongly repudiated that principle when he wrote that the expounder of Scripture “must not import into the text of Scripture the ideas of later times, or build upon any words or passages a dogma which they do not legitimately teach.”<sup>62</sup> Yet recent evangelical interpreters have advocated such “fuller meanings.”<sup>63</sup> Such a practice is in total disharmony with traditional literal interpretation.

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<sup>58</sup>Blaising and Bock, “Dispensationalism, Israel and the Church” 392-93.

<sup>59</sup>Blaising and Bock, *Progressive Dispensationalism* 68.

<sup>60</sup>Bock, “Current Messianic Activity” 71.

<sup>61</sup>Ibid.

<sup>62</sup>Terry, *Biblical Hermeneutics* 583.

<sup>63</sup>E.g. McCartney and Clayton, *Let the Reader Understand* 162, 164; W. W. Klein, C. L. Blomberg, and R. L. Hubbard Jr., *Introduction to Biblical Interpretation* (Dallas: Word, 1993) 139, 145-50; Moisés Silva in a work coauthored with Walter C. Kaiser Jr., *An Introduction to Biblical Hermeneutics: The Search for Meaning* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994) 267.

On this issue that has split evangelicals, PD has come down solidly on the side of incorporating fuller meanings into hermeneutical methodology. Its delineation of “complementary hermeneutics,” as already described, falls clearly into this category. Blaising and Bock explicitly refuse to limit textual meaning to a reproduction of what the author meant when they write, “These texts have a message that extends beyond the original setting in which they were given. Something about what they say lives on.”<sup>64</sup> In essence, they view later applications of the text’s one meaning as additional meanings that accrue over a period of time.<sup>65</sup>

That policy is none other than an advocacy of *sensus plenior*, because it refers to a meaning beyond what is determined by the historical circumstances of the text’s origin.<sup>66</sup> By basing their methodology on this assumption, Blaising and Bock can interpret Babylon in Revelation 17–18 as both Rome and rebuilt Babylon on the Euphrates, and in addition, in “the sweep of history” it could represent any city, since the world empire’s center is always shifting.<sup>67</sup> Using the same complementary hermeneutics, PD advocate Pate expands the meaning of Babylon to include Jerusalem as well.<sup>68</sup> This can be nothing other than adding meanings beyond the literal meaning of the text, in other words, *sensus plenior* interpretation.

In Gen 12:7 Saucy does the same thing with the meaning of “seed,” which in its historical context refers to Abraham’s physical descendants.<sup>69</sup> He also credits Peter in Acts 2 with supplying an additional meaning for Psalm 110.<sup>70</sup> Such practices follow a historical-grammatical-literary-theological hermeneutics, not historical-grammatical principles. On the other hand, to his credit, Saucy calls Matt 2:15 an *application* rather than an *interpretation* of Hos 11:1.<sup>71</sup> The principle of seeing the NT use of the OT as applications rather than interpretations is more in accord with grammatical-historical techniques. The fact that added interpretive applications supplied in the NT did not become discernible until provided by inspired NT writings means that the authority for such interpretations derives from the NT citations, not from the OT passages themselves. This being the case, the support for PD vanishes when evaluated by grammatical and historical criteria. Of course, God knew from eternity past that fuller inspired applications would eventually emerge, but so far as human beings were concerned, such applicatory meanings were nonexistent until the time that NT apostles and prophets disclosed them.

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<sup>64</sup>Blaising and Bock, *Progressive Dispensationalism* 64.

<sup>65</sup>*Ibid.*; cf. also *ibid.*, 65-68.

<sup>66</sup>Bock elsewhere denies that this practice amounts to *sensus plenior* or spiritualizing interpretation, choosing to refer to it as “pattern” fulfillment or typological-prophetic fulfillment (“Current Messianic Activity” 69; cf. Blaising and Bock, *Progressive Dispensationalism* 102-4). Whatever name one applies to the practice, it still violates the strict standards of a consistent grammatical-historical interpretation.

<sup>67</sup>Blaising and Bock, *Progressive Dispensationalism* 93-96.

<sup>68</sup>C. Marvin Pate, “A Progressive Dispensationalism View of Revelation,” in *Four Views on the Book of Revelation*, ed. C. Marvin Pate (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998) 160.

<sup>69</sup>R. L. Saucy, *The Case for Progressive Dispensationalism: The Interface Between Dispensational and Non-Dispensational Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1993) 49.

<sup>70</sup>*Ibid.*, 71.

<sup>71</sup>*Ibid.*, 206.

## Theonomy

Kenneth L. Gentry, Jr., is a leading theonomist whose work on the book of Revelation is typical of Theonomy's approach to eschatology. Behind Gentry's exegetical methodology lies a preunderstanding that controls his interpretation of the book. According to new evangelical hermeneutics, that is a fashionable approach. Gentry's particular preunderstanding is this: a desire for an undiluted rationale to support Christian social and political involvement leading to long-term Christian cultural progress and dominion. Since a futurist approach to Revelation demands that the book's prophecies of a decaying society render impossible long-term cultural progress and dominion, he must find fulfillment of the book's prophecies in the era leading up to and including the fall of Jerusalem in A.D. 70. How preunderstanding distorts certain hermeneutical principles is a matter for consideration.

**Eclectic Hermeneutics.** A dominion theology presupposition forces an interpreter into a pattern of picking and choosing hermeneutical principles as he moves from text to text. Not only is the approach eclectic; it is outright inconsistent with itself.

Gentry exemplifies this in several ways in his work, *Before Jerusalem Fell: Dating the Book of Revelation*.<sup>72</sup> He does not interpret the same passage in the same way from place to place, or within the same discussion differing principles take him in differing interpretive directions.

For instance, he accepts the principle of the symbolic use of numbers, but only for large, rounded numbers such as 1,000, 144,000, and 200 million. Smaller numbers, such as seven, are literal for him.<sup>73</sup>

Also, he rejects the equation of *kings* = *kingdoms* in Revelation 17:10, but later in discussing the "Nero Redivivus Myth" in 17:11, he identifies one of the kings or heads of the Beast in 17:10 as the Roman Empire revived under Vespasian.<sup>74</sup> The latter is part of his strained attempt to explain the healing of the Beast's death wound.

When discussing the 144,000, Gentry at one time is uncertain whether they represent the saved of Jewish lineage or the church as a whole. Yet just ten pages later the same group is definitely Christians of Jewish extraction, because the author needs evidence to tie the fulfillment of Revelation to the land of Judea.<sup>75</sup> Here is another instance of his lack of objectivism and fixed hermeneutical principles to guide interpretation.

According to Gentry, the forty-two months of Rev 11:2 is the period of the Roman siege of Jerusalem from early spring 67 to September 70.<sup>76</sup> A bit earlier he finds John, even while he is writing Revelation, already enmeshed in great tribulation (1:9; 2:22), a period of equal length and

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<sup>72</sup>Tyler, Tex.: Institute for Christian Economics, 1989.

<sup>73</sup>Gentry, *Before Jerusalem Fell* 162-63.

<sup>74</sup>*Ibid.*, 163-64, 310-16.

<sup>75</sup>*Ibid.*, 223-224, 233.

<sup>76</sup>*Ibid.*, 250-53.

apparently simultaneous with the Roman siege.<sup>77</sup> In discussing 13:5-7, however, Gentry separates the Neronian persecution of Christians that constituted “the great tribulation” (vv. 5-7) from the Roman siege of Jerusalem in both time and place, dating it from 64 to 68 and locating it in the Roman province of Asia.<sup>78</sup> Such datings and times are impossible to reconcile with each other. Is John writing during “the great tribulation” of 64-68 or the one of 67-70? Later still, Gentry assigns 65 or early 66 as the date of writing,<sup>79</sup> so John predicted a forty-two month period of persecution (13:5) that was already partially in the past when he wrote. Such reasoning is incoherent, because the pattern of hermeneutics is utterly inconsistent.

The ends to which new evangelical hermeneutics will go to support its preunderstanding of what Scripture should teach is nothing short of amazing.

**Revelation’s Theme Verse.** Gentry and fellow theologian David Chilton agree with most that Rev 1:7 is the theme verse of the book of Revelation,<sup>80</sup> but they do not refer this to the second coming of Christ. The text reads, “Behold, He comes with clouds, and every eye will see Him, even those who pierced Him, and all the families of the earth will mourn over Him.” Theologians refer the verse to the coming judgment on Israel—for them fulfilled in A.D. 70—which resulted in the church becoming the new kingdom.<sup>81</sup> To interpret the verse in that way, they must implement a strange combination of proposals regarding three phrases in the verse.

(1) For Gentry, “those who pierced Him” were the Jews.<sup>82</sup> From the verse, he sees God’s wrath against Israel as the book’s theme.<sup>83</sup> In taking such a view, Gentry excludes any reference to the Romans in the theme verse. Yet elsewhere he acknowledges that in Revelation, Romans were the chief persecutors of Christians,<sup>84</sup> and they were objects of the “cloud coming” of Christ.<sup>85</sup> Justification for such inconsistency is impossible to come by.

(2) Without evaluating another plausible option, Gentry sees “the tribes of the earth” as a plural reference to the tribes of Israel<sup>86</sup> as it is in Zech 12:10-14, the OT passage alluded to, and in John 19:37, another NT citation of Zech 12:10-14.<sup>87</sup> At the same time, he understands the

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<sup>77</sup> Ibid., 234.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid., 254-55.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid., 336.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid., 121-23; Chilton, *Days of Vengeance* 64.

<sup>81</sup> Chilton, *Days of Vengeance* 64; Gentry, *Before Jerusalem Fell* 131-32.

<sup>82</sup> Gentry, *Before Jerusalem Fell* 123-27.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid., 127.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid., 144.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid., 143, 144.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid., 127-28.

<sup>87</sup> Cf. W. Lee, “The Revelation of St. John,” in *The Holy Bible*, ed. F. C. Cook (London: John Murray, 1881) 4:502; J. P. M. Sweet,

mourning to be a mourning of despair rather than a mourning of repentance as it is in Zechariah. Yet for this to be a mourning of despair as the context of Revelation requires (cf. Rev. 9:20-21; 16:9, 11, 21), *phylai* must carry the sense of “families” and must refer to peoples of all nations as it does so often in Revelation (cf. 5:9; 7:9; 11:9; 13:7; 14:6).<sup>88</sup> That is the only way to do justice to the worldwide scope of the book, as required by such verses as 3:10. Even Gentry admits that 3:10 refers to the entire Roman world.<sup>89</sup> The sense of a mourning of despair throughout the earth is the meaning Jesus attached to the words in His use of Zech 12:10 (Matt 24:30).<sup>90</sup>

Theonomists actually understand “the tribes of the earth” to mean “the tribes of the land,” that is, the land of Palestine.<sup>91</sup> The Greek word *gē* can convey such a restricted meaning if special contextual support makes such necessary. Gentry’s acknowledged worldwide scope of Revelation already cited rules out a localized meaning of the term in 1:7, however.

Thus Gentry’s three supports for his interpretation of 1:7 falter even without a consideration of unanswered questions about the alleged “cloud coming” in the A.D. 60s. At one point he identifies the cloud coming with the judgment against Judea in 67-70.<sup>92</sup> At another point he sees it as a coming against the church through the persecution by the Romans from 64 to 68.<sup>93</sup> Still elsewhere the cloud coming for Rome was her internal strife in 68-69.<sup>94</sup> He identifies the cloud coming in three different ways, but nowhere does he tell how the cloud coming relates to the promised deliverance of the church (e.g., Rev 3:11). He finds covenantal and redemptive implications for Christianity in the collapse of the Jewish order,<sup>95</sup> but this falls far short of a personal appearance of Christ to take faithful believers away from their persecution.

Is there no limit to what recent evangelicals will do to bring their preunderstanding into the interpretive process?

**The Sixth King.** According to Gentry, one of the two strongest internal indicators of a writing date for Revelation in the A.D. 60s is the identity of the sixth king in Rev 17:9-11.<sup>96</sup> He uses the “seven hills” of v. 9 to conclude that Rome or the Roman Empire is in view,<sup>97</sup> and then

*Revelation* (Philadelphia: Westminster Pelican, 1979) 67; G. V. Caird, *A Commentary on the Revelation of St. John the Divine*, HNTC (New York: Harper and Row, 1966) 18; J. Moffatt, “The Revelation of St. John the Divine,” in *The Expositor’s Greek Testament*, ed. W. R. Nicoll (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, n.d.) 5:339-40; J. B. Smith, *A Revelation of Jesus Christ* (Scottsdale, Pa.: Herald, 1961) 44.

<sup>88</sup> A. F. Johnson, “Revelatin,” in *EBC* (1981) 12:423.

<sup>89</sup> Gentry, *Before Jersuaem Fell* 143 n. 27.

<sup>90</sup> For a fuller discussion of this issue, see Thomas, *Revelation 1-7* 78-79.

<sup>91</sup> Gentry, *Before Jerusalem Fell* 128-29; Chilton, *Days of Vengeance* 66.

<sup>92</sup> Gentry, *Before Jerusalem Fell* 143.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*, 144.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*, 144-45.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*, 144.

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*, 146.

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*, 149-51.



identifies the seven kings of v. 10 (English text; v. 9 in Greek) as seven consecutive Roman emperors.<sup>98</sup> He lists ten kings, beginning with Julius Caesar (49-44 B.C.) and comes up with Nero (A.D. 54-68) as the sixth emperor. Since 17:10 says “one is,” he concludes that John must have written Revelation during Nero’s reign.

In an attempt to respond to four objections to his theory that the sixth king is Nero, the first three of which responses bypass the exegetical crux of the issue,<sup>99</sup> he assumes that the seven hills tie the Beast to the city of Rome. Contrary evidence against his assumption is plentiful. John’s formula introducing the explanation of 17:9-11, “Here is the mind that has wisdom” (Rev 17:9a), indicates a need for special theological and symbolic discernment to comprehend the explanation. Gentry’s proposal requires no such; it only requires a basic knowledge of geography and numbers, not a special God-given wisdom as 17:9a indicates.<sup>100</sup>

Besides this, what could be a connection between the topography of Rome and seven of the empire’s emperors?<sup>101</sup> Verses 9-10 refer to the scope and nature of the Beast’s power, not to the physical layout of a city.<sup>102</sup> After the reference to the seven hills, the added expression, “they are seven kings,” requires that the mountains or hills be seen in a political rather than geographical light. Strangest of all, though, is Gentry’s failure to fulfill his obligation to explain what a reference to Rome is doing in the middle of a chapter dealing with Babylon, which he takes to represent Jerusalem.<sup>103</sup> The best he can do is to theorize that the harlot riding on the Beast refers to an alliance between Jerusalem and Rome against Christianity.<sup>104</sup> Rome’s prolonged siege and destruction of Jerusalem from the late 60s to 70 hardly gives the impression of any alliance between the Jews and the Romans, however.

In addition to the tenuous nature of Gentry’s use of the seven hills, his conclusion that Nero is the sixth or “the one [who] is” faces serious obstacles. The greatest obstacle is his need to begin counting “kings” with Julius Caesar who was never a king. Rome was a republic in Caesar’s day, and a thirteen-year gap separated his rule from that of Augustus, who according to Gentry’s scheme was the second consecutive king.

Gentry’s theory is full of hermeneutical difficulties, as is any theory that begins interpretation of the text with a preunderstanding of what will result from the investigation.

**Contemporary integrity of the Temple.** Gentry’s second principal, internal indicator of Revelation’s early date is his alleged “indisputable” evidence in Rev 11:1-2 that the temple

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<sup>98</sup>Ibid., 151-52.

<sup>99</sup>Ibid., 159-64.

<sup>100</sup>Lee, “Revelation of St. John” 4:744; Johnson, “Revelation” 12:558.

<sup>101</sup>G. E. Ladd, *A Commentary on the Revelation of John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972) 227.

<sup>102</sup>M. Kiddle, *The Revelation of St. John* (New York: Harper, 1940) 349.

<sup>103</sup>Gentry, *Before Jerusalem Fell* 240-41 n. 26.

<sup>104</sup>Ibid.

was still standing and that Jerusalem's destruction was still future when John wrote the book.<sup>105</sup> His extensive discussion of this point attempts to prove that the Herodian temple of Jesus' day is what 11:1-2 refers to by locating the temple in Jerusalem and showing that it is not a symbol for the church.<sup>106</sup> Yet he gives no attention to the possibility that it may be a *future* literal temple.

He defensively handles the two verses with a mixture of figurative-symbolic and literal-historical hermeneutics.<sup>107</sup> He interprets *ton naon tou theou* ("the temple of God") and *thysiastērion* ("the altar") in v. 1 as symbolic and *tēn aulēn tēn ex«then tou naou* (the court which is outside the temple") in v. 2 as literal. He justifies this radical switch in hermeneutics by saying that John Walvoord and Robert H. Mounce likewise combine literal and figurative in their interpretation of this passage.<sup>108</sup> What Gentry does is radically different from these two, however. He uses figurative and literal meanings for what are essentially the same terms in consecutive verses. *Naos*, for example, is symbolic in v. 1 and literal in v. 2. The temple and altar are literal structures earlier<sup>109</sup> and then the spiritual temple of the church a few pages later.<sup>110</sup> In an athletic contest, changing the rules of the game in the middle of a contest can make anyone a winner. So it is with hermeneutics.

Gentry does not explain how John, isolated as a prisoner on the Island of Patmos so many miles from Jerusalem, can visit the literal city to carry out his symbolical task of measuring the temple. He seems oblivious to language indicating that John was in a prophetic trance to receive revelation in the visional portion of the book (Rev 4:2). He was not to transport himself physically across the Mediterranean Sea to Judea, but "in spirit" he was already there. One cannot quarrel with the conclusion that John's visional responsibility of measuring points in its fulfillment to a literal temple, but it is not the Herodian temple of Jesus' day. It is a future temple to be rebuilt just before Christ's second advent (cf. Dan 9:27; 12:11; Matt 24:15; 2 Thess 2:4). It will indeed be a literal temple, but without a symbolic reference to the church.

Gentry's use of symbolism is inconsistent and self-contradictory. A factoring of preunderstanding into the interpretive process inevitably leads to unimaginable extremes in hermeneutical abuse.

### **The New Testament Use of the Old Testament**

Various preunderstandings of the NT's use of the OT have clouded present-day explanations of how NT writers used the OT, largely because of the neglect of traditional hermeneutical principles, such as the principle of single meaning. The principle of single meaning

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<sup>105</sup> Ibid., 165-69.

<sup>106</sup> Ibid., 169-74.

<sup>107</sup> Ibid., 174-75.

<sup>108</sup> Ibid.

<sup>109</sup> Ibid., 169-70.

<sup>110</sup> Ibid., 174.

requires that every OT passage receive its own grammatical-historical interpretation, regardless of how a NT writer uses it.<sup>111</sup> An OT Scripture itself must not receive multiple meanings by being read through the eyes of the NT. When the single-meaning principle is applied consistently, two kinds of NT usage of the OT become evident. On the one hand, sometimes NT writers abide by the grammatical-historical sense of the OT. On the other hand, in some cases NT writers go beyond the grammatical-historical meaning to apply an OT passage in its NT context so as to give it an additional sense. In the former case a NT writer adopts the OT's literal sense. In the latter case he adopts a nonliteral use of the OT. We may call this nonliteral use an "inspired *sensus plenior* application" (hereafter ISPA) of the OT passage to a new situation. Such a usage is "inspired" because the NT writing in which it appears is inspired by God. It is "*sensus plenior*" in that it gives an additional or fuller sense than the passage had in its OT setting. It is an application because it does not eradicate the literal meaning of the OT passage, but simply applies the OT wording to a new setting.

**Examples of the literal use of the OT in the NT.** In Isa 7:10-11 God through Isaiah offered King Ahaz a sign, but Ahaz in feigned humility refused the offer (7:12). Since Ahaz refused that sign, the LORD chose another, described in 7:14, the miraculous birth of a son to a virgin. The Hebrew word for "virgin" refers to an unmarried woman (Gen 24:43; Prov 30:19; Song 1:3; 6:8), indicating that the birth of Isaiah's own son in Isa 8:3 could not have fulfilled this prophecy. Besides, birth of a son to Isaiah's wife would hardly have satisfied the promise of a "sign" and the son's name of "Immanuel" in 7:14. Matthew noted the fulfillment of this prophecy in the birth of Israel's Messiah in Matt 1:23 and applied the name "Immanuel" (i.e., "God with us") from Isa 7:14 to Him. That was a literal fulfillment of Isaiah's OT prophecy.

Isaiah 28:16 predicts the coming of the chief corner stone,<sup>112</sup> and Psa 118:22 foresees the stone which the builders rejected.<sup>113</sup> Combined, these two prophecies found their literal fulfillment in the incarnation and death of Jesus Christ, according to Matt 21:42<sup>114</sup> along with Mark 12:10; Luke 20:17; Acts 4:11; Rom 9:33; Eph 2:20; and 1 Pet 2:6-8. Christ provided the only sure refuge for Israel, who had made the mistake of relying on foreigners instead. At Jesus' first coming, Israel rejected Him, thereby stumbling in literal fulfillment of this prophecy.

Looking ahead prophetically, Isa 50:6<sup>115</sup> saw the cruel treatment of Jesus by the soldiers during and after His trial. Matthew 26:67 and 27:26, 30 record His being struck, slapped,

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<sup>111</sup> See the chapter on "The Principle of Single Meaning," in Thomas, *Evangelical Hermeneutics* 141-64, for further elaboration on the importance of single meaning. Widespread neglect and violation of this principle has characterized recent evangelical studies on hermeneutics.

<sup>112</sup> "Behold, I am laying in Zion a stone, a tested stone, a costly cornerstone *for* the foundation, firmly placed. He who believes *in it* will not be disturbed."

<sup>113</sup> "The stone which the builders rejected has become the chief corner *stone*."

<sup>114</sup> Jesus said to them, "Did you never read in the Scriptures, 'The stone which the builders rejected, this became the chief corner *stone*; this came about from the Lord, and it is marvelous in our eyes'?"

<sup>115</sup> "I gave My back to those who strike *Me*, and My cheeks to those who pluck out the beard; I did not cover My face from humiliation and spitting."

scourged, and spat upon<sup>116</sup> as do Mark, Luke, and John also (cf. Mark 14:65; 15:19; Luke 22:63; John 18:22). The OT anticipated that abusive treatment, and the NT recorded the prophecy's literal fulfillment.

Fulfillments such as those listed above had great apologetic value in proving to Jewish readers of the OT and others that Jesus was the Messiah promised in the OT. What Isaiah and other OT writers predicted would happen when the Messiah came happened in letter-perfect manner.

**Examples of nonliteral uses of the OT in the NT.** As stated before, the nonliteral uses of the OT in the NT are of the ISPA type. In such uses, NT writers applied OT texts to situations entirely different from what the corresponding OT contexts entailed. The NT writers disregarded the main thrust of grammatical-historical meaning of the OT passages and applied those passages in different ways to suit different points they wanted to make. They may have maintained some connecting link in thought with the OT passages, but the literal OT meanings are absent from the citations. Several passages will illustrate the ISPA usage.

Luke 20:17-18<sup>117</sup> cites Isa 8:14-15.<sup>118</sup> Isaiah's historical context refers the words to Israel's stumbling and consequent captivity in Babylon because they opposed Isaiah's message. Luke applies the same words to the stumbling of the generation of Israelites that rejected Jesus as the Messiah and their consequent eternal judgment. Paul and Peter use the Isaiah passage in the same way (Rom 9:32-33; 1 Pet 2:8). Note the change of reference. In the OT instance, the words referred to personal enemies of Isaiah and the *temporal* judgment inflicted on them; in the NT the generation of Israel that rejected Jesus at His first coming and *eternal* judgment against them are in view.

Isaiah 9:1-2 speaks of the gloom at the northern border of northeast Galilee when the Assyrian king invaded Israel,<sup>119</sup> because that area was the first to suffer from the invasion as the Assyrians entered the land. The verses then speak of the coming of a great light by way of the transformation of that gloom at the end of Israel's captivity to foreign invaders, which will come at the second advent of Jesus Christ. In an ISPA of the words, Matt 4:12-16<sup>120</sup> applies the two Isaianic verses to the time of Christ's first advent and the honor received by Galilee when He

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<sup>116</sup>“Then they spat in His face and beat Him with their fists; and others slapped Him . . . after having Jesus scourged, he delivered Him to be crucified . . . And they spat on Him, and took the reed and *began* to beat Him on the head.”

<sup>117</sup> But He looked at them and said, “What then is this that is written, ‘The stone which the builders rejected, this became the chief corner *stone*’? Everyone who falls on that stone will be broken to pieces; but on whomever it falls, it will scatter him like dust.”

<sup>118</sup>“Then He shall become a sanctuary; but to both the houses of Israel, a stone to strike and a rock to stumble over, *and* a snare and a trap for the inhabitants of Jerusalem. And many will stumble over them, then they will fall and be broken; they will even be snared and caught.”

<sup>119</sup>“But there will be no *more* gloom for her who was in anguish; in earlier times He treated the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali with contempt, but later on He shall make *it* glorious, by the way of the sea, on the other side of Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles. The people who walk in darkness will see a great light; those who live in a dark land, the light will shine on them.”

<sup>120</sup> Now when He heard that John had been taken into custody, He withdrew into Galilee; and leaving Nazareth, He came and settled in Capernaum, which is by the sea, in the region of Zebulun and Naphtali. *This was* to fulfill what was spoken through Isaiah the prophet, saying, “The land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, by the way of the sea, beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles—“the people who were sitting in darkness saw a great light, and to those who were sitting in the land and shadow of death, upon them a light dawned.”

launched His Galilean ministry in that territory. That, of course, is not a literal fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy.

Isaiah 28:11 foresees the Lord's prediction of subservience of the drunkards of Ephraim and Jerusalem to Assyrian taskmasters, who instruct them in a foreign language.<sup>121</sup> This was God's punishment for not listening to His prophets speaking their own language. In his application of the same words, Paul in 1 Cor 14:21-22<sup>122</sup> refers to God's use of the miraculous gift of tongues as a credential to identify those who conveyed new revelation immediately following the first coming of Christ. The meaning in Corinthians is quite different from that in Isaiah.

Isaiah 49:6b contains God's promise that His Servant, the Messiah, will be a light to the Gentiles in providing salvation to the ends of the earth.<sup>123</sup> That will happen during the future kingdom after His return. But in Acts 13:47 Paul uses Isaiah's words in an entirely different way.<sup>124</sup> He applies them to his own ministry among the Gentiles during the present age, not to the LORD'S Servant during the future age of the kingdom. Here again is a clearly nonliteral meaning that allows for a NT application of the prophet's words.

Without a doubt, the NT sometimes applies OT passages in a way that gives an additional dimension beyond their grammatical-historical meaning.<sup>125</sup> This does not cancel the grammatical-historical meaning of the OT; it is simply an application of the OT passage beyond its original meaning, the authority for which applicatory meaning is the NT passage. Such an application is an ISPA.

**Questions raised by ISPA-type citations.** ISPA-type citations of the OT by NT writers raise several questions, whose answers serve to clarify the implications of such usages.

First, can today's interpreter imitate what NT writers did in assigning additional and different, inspired meanings in applying OT passages? The answer is no, they cannot, because such a practice would violate the important principle of single meaning for the OT passages. Current interpreters and preachers may apply the OT passages to different situations, but their applications are not inspired as are those of NT writers. But someone may say, "Don't we learn our hermeneutics from the NT writings?" If we learned our hermeneutical principles from NT writers, that would imply that we possess the gift of apostleship and/or the gift of prophecy that enabled those writers to receive and transmit direct revelation from God. No contemporary interpreter possesses either of those gifts, which enabled men so gifted to practice what some

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<sup>121</sup>“Indeed, He will speak to this people through stammering lips and a foreign tongue. . . .”

<sup>122</sup>“Brethren, do not be children in your thinking; yet in evil be babes, but in your thinking be mature. In the Law it is written, ‘By men of strange tongues and by the lips of strangers I will speak to this people, and even so they will not listen to me,’ says the Lord. So then tongues are for a sign, not to those who believe, but to unbelievers; but prophecy *is for a sign*, not to unbelievers, but to those who believe.”

<sup>123</sup>“I will also make You a light of the nations so that My salvation may reach to the end of the earth.”

<sup>124</sup>“For thus the Lord has commanded us, ‘I have placed you as a light for the Gentiles, that you should bring salvation to the end of the earth.’”

<sup>125</sup>Further examples of both literal and nonliteral uses of the NT's use of the OT may be found in Thomas, *Evangelical Hermeneutics* 243-51.

have called “charismatic exegesis” of the OT.<sup>126</sup> That ability entailed finding hidden or symbolic meanings that could be revealed through an interpreter possessing divine insight.<sup>127</sup> Another way of expressing the difference is to point out that NT writers were directly inspired by God, but today’s interpreters are not. Such a difference rules out ISPA of OT texts to new situations other than those applications that appear in the NT.

A second question relates to the principle of single meaning. Does not the NT’s assigning of an application based on a second meaning for an OT passage violate that principle? That the OT passage has two meanings is obvious, but only one of those meanings derives from a grammatical-historical interpretation of the OT itself. The other comes from a literal analysis of the NT passage that cites the OT passage. The authority for the second meaning is the NT, not the OT. The OT produces only one meaning, the literal one. The *sensus plenior* meaning emerges only after an ISPA of the OT wording to a new situation.

A third question is, “Didn’t God know from the beginning that the OT passage had two meanings?” Obviously He did, but until the NT citation of that passage, the second or *sensus plenior* applicational meaning did not exist as far as humans were concerned. Since hermeneutics is a human discipline, gleaning that second sense is an impossibility in an examination of the OT source of the citation. The additional meaning is, therefore, not a grammatical-historical interpretation of the OT passage. The OT passage has only one meaning.

Fourthly, someone might ask, “Why did the NT writers attach these *sensus plenior* meanings to OT passages?” In most instances, if not every instance, the new meaning given to an OT passage relates to Israel’s rejection of her Messiah at His first advent and the consequent opening of the door of salvation to a new people, the church (see Romans 9–11). The new people consist of both Jews and Gentiles as fellow members of the body of Christ, a mystery not revealed in the pages of the OT (cf. Eph 3:1-7). New meanings through special divine revelation were necessary to relate this new program to what God had been doing throughout the OT period.

Further details regarding ISPA are spelled out in *Evangelical Hermeneutics*.

**Summary of how NT writers use the OT.** A summary of how the literal and ISPA uses of the OT in the NT should be helpful. A comparison with other explanations of the NT’s use of the OT should help to clarify. The following chart summarizes the comparisons.

<i>NT Use of OT Advocates</i>	<i>Principles Advocated</i>	<i>ISPA Response</i>
S. Lewis Johnson and J. I. Packer	C <i>sensus plenior</i> in addition to the literal meaning of the OT C <i>sensus plenior</i> an extrapolation on the plane of the literal meaning C modern interpreters reproduce exegetical methodology of the NT writers	C agrees C disagrees C disagrees

<sup>126</sup> E.g., D. E. Aune, *Prophecy in Early Christianity and the Ancient Mediterranean World* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983) 252; D. Hill, *New Testament Prophecy* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1979) 91.

<sup>127</sup> Cf. Thomas, *Revelation 1–7* 26 n. 70; idem, *Understanding Spiritual Gifts*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1999), 33-34, 58-661, 133-72.

<i>NT Use of OT Advocates</i>	<i>Principles Advocated</i>	<i>ISPA Response</i>
Elliott E. Johnson	C two meanings discoverable in the OT C the text has a stable meaning, unchanged with passing of time C stable meaning is generic or many-faceted	C disagrees C agrees C disagrees
Bruce K. Waltke	C OT always read in light of the NT C fuller sense of OT texts always there, their changed intention deeper and clearer with canon's expansion C original writers and readers were shut out from the text's meaning	C disagrees C disagrees C disagrees
Walter C. Kaiser, Jr.	C rejects NT assignment of <i>sensus plenior</i> meanings to OT C rejects <i>sensus plenior</i> meanings discoverable by modern interpreters C generic meanings in OT allow for several fulfillments of single passage C human author was aware of the series of fulfillments	C disagrees C agrees C disagrees C disagrees
Richard N. Longenecker and Douglas J. Moo	C <i>sensus plenior</i> meanings attached to OT passages by NT writers C methods of Jewish exegesis by NT writers produced <i>sensus plenior</i> meanings for OT C contemporary interpreters can't produce NT methods of handling the OT	C agrees C disagrees C agrees
Darrell L. Bock	C eclecticism drawing on other approaches C God sometimes intended more than the human author C NT events changing the way the church understood the OT C interpreter's preunderstanding a major factor in interpretation C allows later complementary additions in meaning	C disagrees C agrees C disagrees C disagrees C disagrees
John H. Walton	C objectivity in interpretation an important goal C intrusion of the analogy of faith not allowed C subjectivity allowable only with inspiration C contemporary interpreter cannot claim inspiration C Matt 2:15 a <i>fulfillment</i> of Hos 11:1 C objective interpretation determines only one meaning for OT passages	C agrees C agrees C agrees C agrees C disagrees C agrees
Klein, Blomberg, and Hubbard	C biblical authors intended only one meaning, but the Spirit encoded additional meanings for modern interpreters C biblical authors intended only one meaning, but modern interpreters may uncover additional senses	C disagrees C disagrees

### **Impact of New Evangelical Hermeneutics on Eschatology Summarized**

Over the last thirty to thirty-five years, evangelicalism has changed substantially. Accompanying that change is a shift in evangelical hermeneutics. Introduction of preunderstanding as the beginning point in the interpretive process has inevitably made biblical interpretation substantially more subjective. Such an alteration in methodology has had noticeable effects on understanding eschatological passages as it has on all other areas of Scripture.

We have noticed the part of these eschatological changes in interpreting Revelation, in the origination of new movements such as PD and theonomical postmillennialism, and in the NT use of the OT. If the current direction of evangelicalism continues, the movement will eventually reach the status of postmodernist and deconstructionist approaches to the Bible. The only remedy for this sickness will be a return to traditional grammatical-historical principles of

interpretation.