

# Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

## Systems of Discontinuity

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The relation of the Testaments has occasioned much debate throughout church history. Whether one sees more continuity or discontinuity will become evident at various points in one's theological system. No theological system can escape addressing this issue either explicitly or implicitly.



When raising the question of continuity and discontinuity, one potentially raises a series of issues germane to formulating an overall theological system. For example, some argue that neither Testament has a unified theological stance. There are OT and NT theologies, but no single theology for either Testament. Talk of continuity *between* the Testaments seems misguided with so much apparent discontinuity *within* each Testament.<sup>1</sup>

Other crucial questions arise from this issue. Is the OT to be used in formulating Christian theology? If so, how? What is the relationship between Christianity and Judaism, and how does the relation of the Testaments to one another affect the relation of these two religions? And, whatever the relation between the religions, does it allow for genuine dialogue between Jews and Christians? If so, on what grounds and in what ways? Finally, is the theological base of Christianity nothing more than OT theology with Jesus as the Messiah tacked on, or are there radical differences between the theologies of the two Testaments?

The issue of the continuity and discontinuity of the Testaments is addressed both by nonevangelical and evangelical theologians. Hans Wolff is representative of nonevangelicals on the side of continuity. He argues that the events, peoples, and covenants of the OT bear analogy to those of the NT. In virtue of those analogies, he claims that "in the New Testament is found the context of the Old, which, as its historical

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<sup>1</sup> J. I. Packer, "Upholding the Unity of Scripture Today," *JETS* 25 (December 1982) gives a helpful discussion of this issue. Though scholarly literature is replete with discussions dealing with this problem, my essay asks the question at a level which assumes that despite the diversity within each Testament, each Testament properly understood presents a unified (though many-faceted) theological perspective.

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goal, reveals the total meaning of the Old Testament, and also the correspondence in the details helps one to understand the witnessing intent of the Old Testament contexts."<sup>2</sup>

Probably the most famous contemporary nonevangelical proponent of discontinuity is Rudolf Bultmann.<sup>3</sup> Bultmann states that Christian self-understanding is tied to Christ. But the OT on its own terms does not want to speak of Jesus. It can only be made to do so by allegory. Thus, the OT's relevance for Christians is somewhat limited, though important. It can show the way not to go—its negative function. But it also has a positive, pedagogical function to help us understand the NT.<sup>4</sup> The main point, though, is to take very seriously the discontinuity between the Testaments.

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Evangelical systems are also distinguishable on this matter of continuity and discontinuity. Evangelical positions can be placed on a continuum running from belief in the absolute continuity of Scripture to belief in the absolute discontinuity of Scripture. Generally, systems that move toward absolute continuity fit more in the mold of Reformed or covenantal theologies. Systems that move toward absolute discontinuity fit more in the mold of dispensational theologies. While there are varieties of both kinds, it is unlikely that any actual systems are exactly at either end of the continuum.

Though evangelical systems can be placed on this continuum, that does not automatically specify the elements that bind all continuity or discontinuity systems together. Nor does it specify wherein the continuity and discontinuity lie. In this essay, after a brief survey of various systems, I shall specify elements which seem to unite systems of discontinuity. As to my system, it is dispensational, though I see both continuity and discontinuity between the Testaments. I intend to note those elements which are at the essence of any dispensational system.

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<sup>2</sup> Hans Walter Wolff, "The Hermeneutics of the Old Testament," *Int* 15 (October 1961): 457. In view of those analogies, he writes (p. 450): "There is no question but that all along the line in the New Testament Israel, as Yahweh's covenant people, is, as a whole and in detail, a type of the *ecclesia* of Jesus Christ." See also Walther Zimmerli, "Promise and Fulfillment," *Int* 15 (July 1961): *passim*, who comes down on the side of continuity by seeing the NT as the fulfillment of the OT promise. Those promises are fulfilled ultimately in the person of Christ.

<sup>3</sup> Bultmann's key articles on the topic are "The Significance of the Old Testament for the Christian Faith," B. Anderson, ed., *The Old Testament and the Christian Faith* (New York: Harper & Row, 1963), pp. 8–35 and "Prophecy and Fulfillment," C. Westermann, ed., *Essays on Old Testament Hermeneutics* (Richmond: John Knox, 1964), pp. 50–75. For helpful discussions of Bultmann and other contemporary figures on this issue of continuity and discontinuity see Eugene F. Roop, "The Problem of Two Testaments: We Can't Have the New Without the Old," *BrLT* 19 (Summer 1974); F. N. Jasper, "The Relation of the Old Testament to the New: Part I," *ExpT* 78 (May–June 1967); and Roland Murphy, "The Relationship Between the Testaments," *MisBib* 26 (1964).

<sup>4</sup> Bultmann, "Significance of the OT," pp. 14–15, 17.

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## SURVEY OF SYSTEMS

Eugene Roop explains that throughout church history the relationship between the Testaments has been understood in three main ways, the allegorical and typological, the doctrinal, and the historical.<sup>5</sup> The first two emphasize continuity and the third discontinuity. The first followed the lead of the early church and assumed the internal consistency of Scripture. Apparent discrepancies were handled by searching for the “deeper” spiritual meaning which, when found, demonstrated anew the basic consistency of Scripture. As Roop notes, Luther’s rejection of allegory largely ended its use.<sup>6</sup>

According to Roop, the underlying assumption of the doctrinal approach was that the Bible throughout takes the same view on God, man, sin, etc. Systematic theologians claimed to remain true to the Bible, but according to Roop, they could not. Historical analysis uncovers various internal doctrinal changes and conflicting doctrinal traditions in Scripture.<sup>7</sup>

The historical approach (especially prominent after the mid-nineteenth century) emphasized the history of Israel’s religion. Proponents argued that Scripture was not written as a systematic theology. Instead, the various portions of Scripture arose from particular historical contexts which make it especially difficult to systematize them. Careful historical study allows individual writers to be heard, but thereby underscores the conflicts between them. In general, the historical approach emphasized more the discontinuity of Scripture than the continuity.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Roop, p. 158.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 159. Though it is an oversimplification to lump all past systematic theologies together as Roop does, it is true that too often systematicians have overlooked the diversity among biblical authors and have at times artificially removed inconsistencies to maintain continuity. But such practices are not intrinsic to the nature of systematic theology. On the other hand, it is also wrong to grant Roop’s underlying assumption shared with many biblical scholars, viz., that because of so many conflicting traditions in Scripture there is no hope of ever making anything resembling a consistent system out of the data of Scripture. That assumption goes hand in glove with the rejection of the inspiration and inerrancy of Scripture, but there are too many good arguments in favor of those doctrines to grant Roop *et al.* their rejection of those doctrines.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.* I both agree and disagree with Roop’s analysis. He correctly sets forth the general ways the relationship between the Testaments has been understood. On the other hand, he gives the impression that the only way to approach Scripture which really allows it to be heard in all its richness is the historical. According to Roop, this involves recognizing not only the obvious discontinuities in Scripture but also assessing them as contradictions. Moreover, the impression is given that those who have emphasized the harmony and continuity of Scripture have either been allegorizers or systematizers,

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In contemporary nonevangelical discussions, the emphasis has been more the historical approach. However, a few examples show that there have also been approaches stressing continuity.

Without doubt the most influential contemporary thinker on the side of discontinuity is Rudolf Bultmann. As already noted, Bultmann thought the OT's primary function for the Christian is to help him understand human existence, for both Testaments share the same understanding of existence.<sup>9</sup> In so doing, the OT prepares the way for Christ, who is the ultimate answer to OT expectations. But the OT can never mean for us what it does for the Jew, since it never intended to speak of Jesus. In that respect it is irrelevant to the Christian.

Despite his emphasis on discontinuity, Bultmann neither rejects the OT as useless, nor sees in it no grounds of continuity with the NT.<sup>10</sup> Bultmann traces three concepts throughout the two Testaments: "covenant," "the kingdom of God," and "the people of God." All three are in both Testaments (continuity), and yet the NT's understanding of them significantly differs from the OT's. Bultmann sees the OT as prophecy and the NT as fulfillment, but not as OT writers originally meant the prophecies.<sup>11</sup> The OT outlook is empirical and historical. For example, fulfillment of the OT notion of the kingdom of God was thought to be tied very closely to the Jewish theocracy and all the political items pertaining to it. But man cannot properly apprehend God's will. He expects fulfillment of OT prophecy to be historical and empirical. But God has made a new beginning in Christ. His fulfillment, and the NT outlook, is eschatological and supramundane.<sup>12</sup> Thus, there is no longer a theocracy but only "the dominion of God" and the idea of a community in which God's name is hallowed and His will is operative."<sup>13</sup>

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neither of whom have paid enough attention to what the text of Scripture actually says. Such charges are overstatements and misrepresentations. It is false that systems which recognize the discontinuities in Scripture must assert contradictions between the writers or that a healthy respect for discontinuity makes it impossible to systematize. Likewise, it is wrong to suggest that all systems stressing continuity are guilty (implicitly or explicitly) of allegorizing or artificially systematizing Scripture in ways that prohibit the text from being heard.

<sup>9</sup> Bultmann, "The Significance of the OT," pp. 13, 20–9 as cited in Jasper, p. 230.

<sup>10</sup> Bultmann's "Prophecy and Fulfillment" shows that he does take the OT seriously. However, see Murphy, p. 350, for one who portrays Bultmann as stressing nothing other than the most radical form of discontinuity.

<sup>11</sup> Bultmann, "Prophecy and Fulfillment," p. 50ff. Bultmann cites Isa 7:14, Jer 31:15, and Isa 53:4 as examples.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 60–61.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 67. See Jasper, pp. 229–230 and especially Millard Lind, "The Hermeneutics of the Old Testament," *MenQR* 40 (July 1966): 228–31 for extremely helpful discussions of Bultmann.

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How, then, for the OT does Jewish history represent prophecy which is fulfilled in the history of the NT community? For Bultmann the fulfillment is in its miscarriage. Israel's understanding of herself as God's people led to the idea of a transcendent God, but Israel, refusing to think in terms of the eschatological, transcendent, or supramundane, thought in empirical and historical terms. Nonetheless, OT prophecy is fulfilled in the NT in an eschatological sense.<sup>14</sup> For Bultmann, then, there is continuity between the Testaments, but not in the way the people of the OT thought.

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Friedrich Baumgärtel offers a second discontinuity approach. He viewed the OT as a witness to an entirely different religion than Christianity. The "simple Christian" approaches the OT with a prior understanding from the NT. But that will not do, for such interpretation overlooks the fact that the OT comes out of a religion lived under different historical, cultural, and religious conditions than the NT.<sup>15</sup> This does not negate the OT's relevance for the Christian. In both Testaments the people of God share the experience of the living God who is "my God." That fact is the basis of unity between the Testaments, but it can only be fully understood after recognizing the OT's uniqueness. As Baumgärtel says:

... we must first just lose the Old Testament completely, i.e., comprehend it in its self-understanding as completely separate from the New Testament and in no way "justified" through the gospel! — in order to win it back at all.<sup>16</sup>

From the perspective of continuity, Gerhard von Rad is an important figure. Von Rad notes that in Israel's history God was constantly performing new mighty acts which in a way made a new beginning between God and his people. As a result, Israel had no uniform conception of God.<sup>17</sup> However, biblical writers did not want to jettison the prior traditions or there would appear to be no continuity whatsoever in her history with God. They maintained continuity by "adapting older traditions to suit the new situation."<sup>18</sup> This was done by nothing analogies or correspondences between the older and newer situations.<sup>19</sup> Likewise, NT writers maintained continuity with the OT by adapting,

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<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 72.

<sup>15</sup> Friedrich Baumgärtel, "The Hermeneutical Problem of the Old Testament," C. Westermann, ed., *Essays on Old Testament Hermeneutics* (Richmond: John Knox, 1969), pp. 134–135, 144ff.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 156. See also Franz Hesse, "The Evaluation and Authority of Old Testament Texts," C. Westermann, ed., *Essays on Old Testament Hermeneutics* for another approach that emphasizes discontinuity.

<sup>17</sup> Gerhard von Rad, *Old Testament Theology*, II (New York: Harper & Row, 1965), p. 328.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 323ff. See also Gerhard von Rad, "Typological Interpretation of the Old Testament," C. Westermann, ed., *Essays on Old Testament Hermeneutics*, p. 35–37.

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absorbing, transforming (reactualizing, to use von Rad's word) the old traditions.<sup>20</sup> While continuity was maintained by typological reinterpretation of the OT events, von Rad also argues that without such typological understanding of the Testaments, there would be no continuity, for the NT goes beyond and is discontinuous with the historical self-understanding of the OT.<sup>21</sup>

Though von Rad's position is ostensibly one of continuity, it involves less continuity than one might think.<sup>22</sup> By contrast, other scholars have held positions that appear more genuinely to stress continuity. For example, some have asserted continuity on grounds of recurring themes. N. H. Snaith relates the Testaments<sup>23</sup> on the basis of such distinctive ideas of the OT as God's holiness, righteousness, salvation, covenant-love, and election-love. He argues that while in the NT the incarnation and the Greek language transform these ideas to some extent, unquestionably the OT is foundational to NT understanding of these notions.<sup>24</sup> Others like Zimmerli argue for continuity on the basis of promise and fulfillment. The OT is replete with promises that are fulfilled either during OT history or in the NT with Christ's coming. Fulfillment is probably not always what the OT writer anticipated, but still, there is genuine fulfillment.<sup>25</sup>

When turning to evangelicals, one also finds great diversity on this issue. Some stress continuity more and others discontinuity more, but even within the respective camps there is diversity. For example, Reformed or covenantal theologians usually are in the continuity camp, but not all covenantal thinkers hold identical positions. Some

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<sup>20</sup> Von Rad, *Old Testament Theology*, p. 335.

<sup>21</sup> Von Rad, "Typological Interpretation," pp. 36–37. For helpful treatments of von Rad's position see Murphy, Roop, and especially the excellent study by John H. Stek, "Biblical Typology Yesterday and Today," *CTJ* 5 (1970).

<sup>22</sup> Von Rad is saying that the events, peoples, etc. of the two Testaments actually have little unity. Unity comes from the typological connections either the exegete makes or the biblical writers already made. So, continuity is not intrinsic to the Testaments; it is placed on the events and personages by the NT writers themselves. While this does assert the continuity of *Scripture*, it rejects the continuity of the events and experiences of the peoples which lie behind the writing of the Testaments. Von Rad's view is not far from Bultmann in its underlying assumptions. For both, the OT really does not intrinsically relate to the NT. Left to its self-understanding, it is not really a Christian book. It can be made to relate to the NT by the interpreter and/or NT author, but otherwise it is discontinuous. Von Rad does emphasize the unity that can be and has been made by typological reinterpretation of the OT by the NT writers, whereas Bultmann, while not denying the unity, stresses more the need to take the discontinuity very seriously. Otherwise, their basic views are quite similar.

<sup>23</sup> Norman H. Snaith, *The Distinctive Ideas of the Old Testament* (New York: Schocken, 1975).

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 159.

<sup>25</sup> Zimmerli, pp. 333–336. Lest we think this is just Bultmann and von Rad's view that there is no real fulfillment but only one which the NT writers impose to unite the Testaments, Zimmerli distances himself from those ideas by rejecting Bultmann. Zimmerli's is a genuine approach of continuity.

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covenantalists like O. T. Allis and Anthony Hoekema are amillennial in their view of the kingdom, while others broadly in the covenantal and continuity camp like G. E. Ladd are premillennial. Moreover, O. T. Allis holds that the great OT covenants made with Israel (e.g., Abrahamic and Davidic) were conditional,<sup>26</sup> whereas O. Palmer Robertson sees them as both conditional and unconditional. God unilaterally promised blessings for Israel. The particular Jews realizing the fulfillment are those meeting the spiritual conditions of the covenant.<sup>27</sup>

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A similar diversity exists on the discontinuity side. For example, Dispensationalism hardly represents a monolithic approach. Even critics like Daniel Fuller admit that the Dispensationalism of the *Scofield Reference Bible* differs from that of the *New Scofield Reference Bible*, at least in the way the two portray salvation in the Testaments.<sup>28</sup> In addition, some dispensationalists, while appreciative of Ryrie's *Dispensationalism Today*, do not think its changes to the system go far enough.

Finally, some nondispensational positions are more on the side of discontinuity than continuity. Some of the writers in this volume fit into this category. For example, Kaiser's promise theology steers a mediating position between Covenantalism and Dispensationalism. Thus, he recognizes both continuity and discontinuity between the Testaments. Nonetheless, in various ways Kaiser differentiates his views from those more typically taken by members of the continuity camp. While he sees the major link between the Testaments as the continuity of the promises of God and their fulfillment, he also notes that the promises cover other matters than just redemption. Thus, as is more typical of the discontinuity side, he sees the need for a literal earthly (social, political), as well as spiritual, reign of Christ, i.e., he is a premillennialist.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Oswald T. Allis, *Prophecy and the Church* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1977 repr.), p. 31–33.

<sup>27</sup> O. Palmer Robertson, *The Christ of the Covenants* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1980), pp. 246–248. This does not make Robertson a dispensationalist or even a premillennialist. For another interesting continuity position see the work of Bruce Waltke (following the lead of Brevard Childs) in "A Canonical Process Approach to the Psalms," John S. & Paul D. Feinberg, eds., *Tradition and Testament* (Chicago: Moody, 1981).

<sup>28</sup> Daniel Fuller, *Gospel and Law: Contrast or Continuum?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980), pp. 33–35.

Actually, earlier Dispensationalism never held multiple ways of salvation. However, various unguarded statements from dispensational works made it appear that multiple ways of salvation were advocated. As Charles Ryrie, *Dispensationalism Today* (Chicago: Moody, 1965), chapter 6, shows, dispensational writers have never held to more than one way of salvation.

<sup>29</sup> For a fuller presentation of Kaiser's views see such works as Walter C. Kaiser, *Toward an Old Testament Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1978). Though I am not suggesting that Kaiser is a dispensationalist, upon reflection over his position it seems fair to say he falls more within the discontinuity camp than the continuity camp.

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## ESSENTIALS OF DISPENSATIONALISM

Not all discontinuity or dispensational positions are alike. Nonetheless, it seems possible to delineate those elements essential to all dispensational systems.<sup>30</sup> However, before turning directly to that matter, it is important to raise an initial distinction and then to clarify items not at the heart of Dispensationalism. As to the distinction, in assessing any conceptual system it is always crucial to distinguish foundational principles from notions which are applications of those foundational principles. The system is generated from the former, and without adherence to them one cannot properly claim to hold the system. Rejecting particular applications of foundational principles, however, does not disqualify one as an adherent to the system.

This distinction is especially important for Dispensationalism, for both proponents and critics have too often treated applications of the system like foundational principles. Consequently, dispensationalists have assumed wrongly that rejection of such applications entails departure from the position. Likewise, nondispensationalists have wrongly understood adherence to Dispensationalism to mean agreement with every applicational point. Invariably, applications of dispensational fundamentals are the notions found most objectionable. Let me illustrate.

All dispensationalists think some sort of distinction between Israel and the church is important. They also think one must take seriously the unconditionality of covenants like the Abrahamic and Davidic and the implications for Israel's future the covenants apparently entail. All these items, properly understood, are foundational to dispensational theologies. On the other hand, many dispensationalists have held that the Sermon on the Mount is relevant only to the millennial kingdom and thus is not for today. Others have claimed there must be two New Covenants, one for the church (given Jesus' comments in the Gospels and the message of Hebrews) and one for Israel (given Jeremiah 31's unconditional promise to Israel).<sup>31</sup> The positions on the Sermon on the Mount and the two New Covenants are applications of the more foundational principles mentioned above. And I think they are inaccurate applications. As to the Sermon on the Mount, one

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<sup>30</sup> I speak of the essence of Dispensationalism in the sense of setting forth the characteristics that put dispensational systems into a general family, that are distinctive to Dispensationalism, and that generate the system. My point is that all dispensational systems, regardless of how they nuance the six items I'll mention, hold the six. And I think the six are logically connected. Thus, if one rejects some of the six, he may still qualify as a dispensationalist, though perhaps an inconsistent one. The greater number of these one holds, the more dispensational and discontinuity-oriented he becomes in his theology.

<sup>31</sup> See, for example, John Walvoord, "Millennial Series," *BSac* 110 (July 1953): 193–205; Charles Ryrie, *The Basis of Premillennial Faith* (New York: Loizeaux, 1953), pp. 105–125; and L. S. Chafer, *Systematic Theology*, 4 (Dallas: Dallas Seminary, 1948), p. 325.



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need not deny the kingdom's presence in some sense in this age to safeguard a special expression of it later for national Israel. The spiritual dimensions of it can be operative now for all people (which allows the Sermon on the Mount to be relevant today) without precluding a future earthly 1000-year social, political, and spiritual expression of the kingdom with special emphasis on Israel. As to the New Covenant, why can it not have one application to the church now plus a further application to national Israel in the future?

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My interpretations here are also applications of more foundational ideas. They entail neither amillennialism, nor ignoring of OT covenant promises to Israel, nor blurring any proper distinction between Israel and the church. The overall lesson, though, is to distinguish between essentials and applications.

As to essentials of Dispensationalism, there has been much confusion. For example, traditional to dispensational thinking is that one defines *Dispensationalism* by defining a dispensation. More specifically, the approach is to offer biblical evidence that there are dispensations. Thus, dispensationalists typically note that “dispensation” (οἱ κονομίαι) is a biblical word with a particular meaning, a meaning which supposedly not only defines a dispensation but *Dispensationalism*. John Walvoord defines *Dispensationalism* this way in his 1958 article on dispensational premillennialism.<sup>32</sup> So does Willard Aldrich in his 1963 article.<sup>33</sup> Even in *Walvoord: A Tribute* (1982) the same methodology is adopted. Elliott Johnson claims that the exegetical base for *Dispensationalism* (not just for dispensations) is the biblical word οἱ κονομίαι.<sup>34</sup> Stanley Toussaint claims, “It is imperative for any discussion of dispensationalism to begin with a mutual understanding of the subject. Perhaps the most famous definition is that given in the *Scofield Reference Bible*.”<sup>35</sup> Toussaint offers the Scofield definition of a “dispensation,” notes that the *New Scofield* definition is essentially the same, and then offers Chafer's and Ryrie's definitions of a dispensation.<sup>36</sup> Toussaint offers all of these items as a definition of *Dispensationalism*.

While οἱ κονομίαι is a biblical word, and a dispensation is to be defined roughly as these men have, none of this defines the essence of *Dispensationalism*, a system or approach to Scripture. Thinking it does errs in at least two key ways. The initial error is thinking that the word “dispensation” and talk of differing administrative orders only appears in

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<sup>32</sup> John F. Walvoord, “Dispensational Premillennialism,” *CT* 2 (September 15, 1958): 11.

<sup>33</sup> Willard Aldrich, “A New Look at Dispensationalism,” *BSac* 120 (January 1963): 42–4.

<sup>34</sup> Elliott Johnson, “Hermeneutics and Dispensationalism,” Donald Campbell, ed., *Walvoord: A Tribute* (Chicago: Moody, 1982), p. 240ff.

<sup>35</sup> Stanley Toussaint, “A Biblical Defense of Dispensationalism,” Donald Campbell, ed., *Walvoord: A Tribute*, p. 82.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.* In fairness to Ryrie, while he defines “dispensation,” he does not claim that he has thereby defined the essence of *Dispensationalism*. Ryrie suggests several other items as the essence of *Dispensationalism*.

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dispensational thinking. Which covenant theologian thinks οὐ κοινῶς is not a biblical word? Moreover, covenantalists often speak, for example, of differing dispensations of the covenant of grace.<sup>37</sup> Since both dispensationalists and nondispensationalists use the term and concept of a dispensation, that alone is not distinctive to Dispensationalism. It is no more distinctive to Dispensationalism than talk of covenants is distinctive to Covenant Theology. Dispensationalists talk about covenants all the time.

The error, however, is at an even deeper level. The term and concept “dispensation” are not even at the essence of the system. The fundamental error of Johnson, Toussaint, and others is thinking that they can define a conceptual scheme (*Dispensationalism*) by defining a term (“dispensation”). Defining a word and defining a concept are not the same thing. Defining a word involves giving an analysis of the ways in which the word is used in various contexts. Defining a concept involves delineating the fundamental qualities that make it what it is. Dispensationalists apparently have not understood the distinction and so have assumed they could define a system of thought (a conceptual matter) by defining a word. Defining the term “dispensation” no more defines the essence of Dispensationalism than defining the term “covenant” explains the essence of Covenant Theology.

A second area of confusion involves what God is doing with history. Dispensationalists often claim that each dispensation involves a test for man, a failure, and a judgment. While many claim this is a secondary characteristic of a dispensation, many take this idea to suggest that what God is doing with history is attempting to demonstrate that man is a failure under all circumstances and thus needs God.<sup>38</sup> For example, after noting that each dispensation has a test and a failure, Norman Geisler asks for the point of all of this. He responds:

The point may very well be that God is trying to accomplish several things through His plan for the ages. First, He wants to prove to the universe [of rational creatures] that creatures will always fail and bring evil [not good] on themselves when they disobey God’s commands. Second, and conversely, God wants to prove that it is always right to obey His commands, for when individuals do they bring good and

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<sup>37</sup> See, for example, O. Palmer Robertson, “Current Reformed Thinking on the Nature of the Divine Covenants,” *WTJ* 40 (Fall 1977) with its discussion of John Murray and Meredith Kline, and also Anthony A. Hoekema, *The Bible and the Future* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979), p. 194. See also The Westminster Confession of Faith (1647), Chap. 7.

<sup>38</sup> Perhaps some have even thought it means God is experimenting with history to find the conditions under which man can succeed, but I know of no dispensationalist who holds that.

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blessing on themselves. In that way heaven can be full of free creatures and yet justly rule out any rebellion again.<sup>39</sup>

Despite any plausibility to these ideas, if this is what God is doing with history, it surely is odd. Why does God have to prove anything to anyone? If God says no one is righteous and that none seeks on his own to do God's will (and God surely says that), isn't that enough proof? Is God suspect as a potential liar until he runs history through all the dispensations to prove that he was right all along? Moreover, if God *is* trying to prove this, why seven times over? Wouldn't two or three times do? Or maybe before we can agree, God needs to prove this in all *possible* economies, and that would surely be more than seven. If this sounds strange, and it does, it suggests that such thinking is utterly wrong-headed. Perhaps some will respond that God does this not to demonstrate his veracity but so we will get the message. But the fact is some people never get the message no matter how much it is repeated. And many who understand God's point do not need it repeated. Besides, whether we understand it or not, if God says it even once, it is true. In sum, I do not think this notion is correct, but beyond that, nothing essential to Dispensationalism depends on it.

Third, the number of dispensations one holds is not an essential of the system. Many dispensationalists think there are seven, but some see the eternal state as an eighth. In addition, nondispensationalists typically claim God related to man differently before and after the fall and differently in NT times than in OT times. No one seriously thinks that recognizing those three economies makes nondispensationalists dispensational. The number of dispensations is not at the heart of the system.

Fourth, neither Calvinism nor Arminianism is at the essence of Dispensationalism. Some Calvinists are nondispensationalists, and others, like myself, are dispensationalists. The same is true of Arminians. This matter is not at the essence of Dispensationalism, because Calvinism and Arminianism are very important in regard to concepts of God, man, sin, and salvation. Dispensationalism becomes very important in regard to ecclesiology and eschatology, but is really not about those other areas. Some think salvation is at the heart of Dispensationalism, because they erroneously think Dispensationalism teaches multiple methods of salvation. Those who properly understand the position realize its emphasis lies elsewhere.

Finally, dispensational understanding of the law is not an essential of the system. Some argue that Dispensationalism entails antinomianism, since dispensationalists claim that the law is done away, for Christ is the end of the law (Rom 10:4). Though some may hold

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<sup>39</sup> Norman Geisler, "God, Evil, and Dispensations," Donald Campbell, ed., *Walvoord: A Tribute*, pp. 104–106. Geisler is merely exemplary of many other dispensationalists on this matter.

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this view, it is hardly the norm or necessitated by Dispensationalism. Certainly, the Mosaic Code has ended. Otherwise we should live in a theocracy, offer up animal sacrifices for sin, and stone to death adulterers and children who disobey their parents.<sup>40</sup> Even the great historic Confessions of Faith (nondispensational) uniformly claim that with the coming of Christ, we are not under the Mosaic Law and thus, are not required to live in a theocracy or abide by the OT sacrificial system.<sup>41</sup> However, not being under the Mosaic Code does not mean one is without law, and dispensationalists make no such claims. Dispensationalists claim that the believer is under the Law of Christ as outlined in the NT. As in the case of the Mosaic Code, the Law of Christ embodies the timelessly true moral principles of God which are instanced in both codes. But as a separate code the Law of Christ excludes the ceremonial and civil aspects of the Mosaic Code. Dispensationalism is neither antinomian nor entails it.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Most who argue for the continuity of the Scriptures do not encourage such practices. Of course, followers of Greg Bahnsen's *Theonomy in Christian Ethics* and *By This Standard* do take an approach somewhat akin to that just mentioned, but nothing intrinsic to continuity systems necessitates that view.

<sup>41</sup> See for example, The French Confession of Faith (1559), Art. 23; The Belgic Confession (1561), Art. 25; The Thirty-Nine Articles of the Church of England (1563), Art. 7; The Second Helvetic Confession (1566), Art. 12; The Irish Articles of Religion (1615), Art. 84; The Westminster Confession of Faith (1647), Chapters 3–4; Methodist Articles of Religion (1784), Art. 6; Reformed Episcopal Articles of Religion (1875), Art. 6.

<sup>42</sup> Other items thought essential to Dispensationalism are (1) the postponed kingdom concept, (2) the full offer of the kingdom at Christ's first advent, (3) the church as a parenthesis, (4) a pretribulation rapture, and (5) premillennialism. None of these is, however, the key. So long as one says the full expression of the kingdom for national Israel is yet to be realized, one need not demand that the kingdom is totally inoperative today to uphold Dispensationalism. As to the full offer of the kingdom at Christ's first advent, many dispensationalists hold it, but I see no reason for having to hold it to be a dispensationalist. So long as one grants that the full expression of the kingdom in all its social, political, economic, and spiritual dimensions will be realized in a future day for Israel, nothing essential to Dispensationalism is lost, even if the kingdom was not offered in its entirety at the first advent. As to the church as a parenthesis in God's dealings with Israel (giving the impression that the church is either an afterthought or unimportant or both), it is false that this notion is essential to Dispensationalism. The word "parenthesis" is an unfortunate choice of words. Because of the negative connotations of "parenthesis," it is better to say God's dealings with the church are an intercalation in his dealings with Israel. What dispensationalists really mean when they use the word is that it is a break in God's dealings with Israel, but not that the church is of secondary importance or even an afterthought. Surely, no dispensationalist of a Calvinist bent like myself would ever claim that anything that happens is something unexpected, unplanned or unimportant to God. Talk of a parenthesis does not make one a dispensationalist anyway. As to pretribulationism, most dispensationalists hold it, but that does not mean the system ultimately is generated from the notion. Moreover, in recent years with Robert Gundry's *The Church and the Tribulation* it is at least moot as to whether one must be a pretribulationist if one is a dispensationalist. Finally, dispensationalists are premillennialists, but even this item does not seem to be at the essence of the system. Some premils are not dispensationalists. In that respect the view is not distinctive to Dispensationalism. In addition, the system does not flow logically from premillennialism. If one holds the

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If none of these notions is at the essence of Dispensationalism, what is? There are six different items which appear to be both distinctive to Dispensationalism and at its core. Moreover, any system which tends in the direction of a discontinuity system tends in this direction, and any system of continuity moves away from these items.

## MULTIPLE SENSES OF TERMS LIKE “JEW,” “SEED OF ABRAHAM”

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Ryrie claims that a dispensationalist is one who makes a consistent distinction between Israel and the church.<sup>43</sup> However, this is not quite the point, for many covenant theologians distinguish Israel from the church. Even continuity systems which most allegorize the OT to read like a Christian book still recognize that references to Israel’s history do relate to national Israel, even if those events foreshadow something about the church. Likewise, when reading NT passages like Romans 11 about the natural olive branches being broken off, they interpret that as a reference to ethnic Jews. It is dubious that any continuity system never distinguishes the two.

But Ryrie did claim the key was consistent distinction. However, this is still not the key, and can even be somewhat misleading. What does “consistent” distinction mean? There is a naive sense of consistency according to which whenever one sees terms like “seed of Abraham” and “chosen race,” he always understands them as a reference to national Israel, regardless of the context. But if that is what consistency means, then even dispensationalists do not make a consistent distinction between Israel and the church! What dispensationalist thinks the references to a “holy nation,” “chosen people,” and “royal priesthood” in 1 Pet 2:9 are not references to the church? What dispensationalist thinks the discourse on the “seed of Abraham” in Romans 4 only refers to ethnic Jews? Another way to understand consistency is that uses of the terms which are clearly national are always interpreted as such, and uses which are spiritual are always interpreted as such. While this is better, it still is not quite the point.

The real point is that dispensationalists recognize multiple senses of terms like “Jew,” “seed of Abraham,” “chosen people,” and they insist that none of those senses is canceled out or becomes unimportant once one turns to the NT.<sup>44</sup> Specifically, Scripture uses these

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dispensationalist’s hermeneutic, holds his position on the covenants, and makes the dispensationalist’s point about Israel and the church, he will be led to premillennialism of a dispensational sort. But this only illustrates that for a dispensationalist, premillennialism is not *logically* prior to other foundational intellectual commitments. Ryrie makes this point on p. 44 of *Dispensationalism Today*.

<sup>43</sup> Ryrie, pp. 43–47.

<sup>44</sup> As Carl Hoch, “The Significance of the SYN-Compounds for Jew-Gentile Relationships in the Body of Christ,” *JETS* 25 (June 1982): 179, notes, some have argued that “Israel” is only used in a national and ethnic sense, never in a spiritual sense. But even if “Israel” is used in a spiritual sense in Scripture, my point still stands.

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terms in at least four distinct senses. The first is a biological, ethnic, national sense. In this sense they refer to biological, genetic Jews, i.e., biological descendants from Abraham. This sense is operative in the NT as well as the OT. For example, without recognizing this sense in Romans 9–11, much of that passage becomes unintelligible.

Second, the terms are sometimes used in a political sense. For example, at one point in the OT “Israel” refers to all twelve tribes, the nation, under the rule of David. Later it refers only to the Northern Kingdom (e.g., Jer 3:11). In the Gospels when Jesus is called “King of the Jews,” that title is used in a political sense. This sense is not identical to the preceding, for through military conquest or conversions to Judaism followed by living in Israel the political nation of Israel could have at times included non-ethnic Jews.

A third sense is a spiritual one. Terms like “seed of Abraham” and “chosen race” also apply to any individual or group, regardless of ethnic background, properly related spiritually to God by faith, i.e., the redeemed.<sup>45</sup> The terms in this sense may be used of Gentiles (e.g., some instances of “seed of Abraham” in Romans 4). But the terms in their spiritual sense are even used to distinguish mere biological Jews from Jews who are both biologically *and* spiritually related to God (e.g., Rom 9:6ff.).<sup>46</sup>

A final use of the terms may be called typological. For example, in the OT there are times when Israel, while being Israel, may also function as a type of the church. Some NT passages even state that some event involving Israel is a lesson for the church (1 Cor 10:1–6, e.g.).

What is distinctive about dispensational systems in regard to these multiple senses? Many continuity systems either seem unaware of the multiple senses of the terms or only recognize senses other than the spiritual and typological in limited cases like Romans 11 where the passage makes little sense without the ethnic sense. Others do recognize the distinction in senses, but then seem to emphasize only the spiritual or typological uses.<sup>47</sup> What is distinctive of dispensational thinking is recognition of all senses of these terms

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<sup>45</sup> John Walvoord, “The Doctrine of Grace in the Interpretation of Prophecy,” *BSac* 140 (April–June 1983): 103, even recognizes a spiritual sense to terms like “seed of Abraham.” However, he is quick to add that what distinguishes the amil from his position is that amillenarians gloss over the fact that “the *spiritual* seed of Abraham—believing Gentiles—inherits the promise given to the Gentiles, not the promise that was given to Israel.”

<sup>46</sup> Incidentally, Gal 3:28–29 does not teach that believers lose their genetic identity or that biological distinctions are irrelevant to every area of life. The point is that for the spiritual seed of Abraham there is no advantage or disadvantage *for one’s spiritual standing with God* that accrues from one’s biological heritage.

<sup>47</sup> For example, having claimed that there are different senses to terms like “Israel,” Robertson pp. 288–289) then defines and focuses on only one of them, the typological sense in regard to the church, and thus concludes that the church takes the place of Israel.

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as operative in both Testaments coupled with a demand that no sense (spiritual especially) is more important than any other, and that no sense cancels out the meaning and implications of the other senses. The more one emphasizes the distinctness and importance of the various senses, the more dispensational and discontinuity-oriented his system becomes, for the distinct senses necessitate speaking of Israel ethnically, politically, and spiritually, as well as speaking of the church.

## HERMENEUTICS

Hermeneutics are also crucial to Dispensationalism. Ryrie claims the key is consistent use of literal hermeneutics,<sup>48</sup> whereas nondispensationalists are either non-literalists or inconsistent literalists. Other dispensationalists agree. For example, Walvoord argues that amillennialists arrive at their position in part by rejecting literal hermeneutics.<sup>49</sup> He even argues that premillennialists who hold post-tribulationism derive it through a non-literal understanding of the tribulation.<sup>50</sup>

Though I think the charge as presented by Ryrie is too simplistic, this is not an easy issue. And nondispensationalists have added to the confusion by what they have said. For one thing, nondispensational thinkers do not take a unified stand on the issue. Many nondispensational thinkers claim to handle prophecy (OT prophecy in particular) non-literally.<sup>51</sup> For example, O. T. Allis argues that many OT prophecies concerning Israel's future must be interpreted non-literally because, among other reasons, the promises were conditioned on obedience. When Israel disobeyed, she forfeited the promises, and now they must be reinterpreted to apply to the church in a non-literal way.<sup>52</sup> Allis charges that Dispensationalism errs by being overly literal. He writes:

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<sup>48</sup> Ryrie, pp. 45–46.

<sup>49</sup> Walvoord, "Grace," pp. 100, 102–103.

<sup>50</sup> See John Walvoord, "Posttribulationism Today, Part II, Classic Posttribulation Interpretation," *BSac* 132 (April 1975): 121–2 and "Posttribulationism Today, Part III, Semiclassic Posttribulation Interpretation," *BSac* 132 (July 1975): 214. Walvoord argues that the premil post-trib wants to interpret Revelation 19–22 literally so that there will be a literal kingdom, but wants to spiritualize completely Revelation 1–18 in regard to the tribulation.

<sup>51</sup> See, for example, Floyd E. Hamilton, *The Basis of Millennial Faith* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1942), p. 38. For a very thorough exposition of continuity hermeneutics (though not all continuity positions would agree with everything he says) see Hans K. LaRondelle, *The Israel of God in Prophecy* (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University, 1983), chaps. 1–5.

<sup>52</sup> Allis, p. 31–33.

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The primary aim has been to show that Dispensationalism has its source in a faulty and unscriptural literalism which, in the important field of prophecy, ignores the typical and preparatory character of the Old Testament dispensation.<sup>53</sup>

The comment about typology is crucial, as we shall see, but the point now is Allis' espousal of non-literal hermeneutics for interpreting prophecy.<sup>54</sup>

While some nondispensational thinkers claim to interpret non-literally, others claim to interpret literally. For example, O. Palmer Robertson argues that the best way to understand the fulfillment of New Covenant prophecies (Jeremiah 31; 33) is to see them as having a "multi-staged fulfillment, based on the typical/actual contrast of Scripture."<sup>55</sup> Accordingly, while there may have been in the OT some sense of fulfillment of the New Covenant promises within seventy years of the promise (Jer 25:12; 29:10), we see a further fulfillment when Jesus institutes a New Covenant. Robertson calls this "another kind of 'literal' fulfillment."<sup>56</sup> Moreover, Ladd argues that reinterpreting the OT in the light of the Christ event merely follows the habit of NT writers who do the same (e.g., Hos 11:1/Matt 2:15; Joel 2/Acts 2; Amos 9/Acts 15).<sup>57</sup> In so doing, the writers and interpreters of the OT merely see more clearly the referent of the OT prophecy than the OT saint may have. But this practice is not non-literalism, since the OT was unfulfilled by the end of OT times and left it open as to what the fulfillment would be. If OT prophecies had been fulfilled and were then reinterpreted to apply to the church in the NT, that would seem to be non-literalism, but application of the passage to the church is hardly allegorism if the passage is unfulfilled by the end of the OT.

To further illustrate the confusion, we need only turn to Hoekema's *The Bible and the Future*. Hoekema claims that the fulfillment of Amos 9:11–12 in Acts 15:14–18 is a clear biblical example of a prophecy being fulfilled *figuratively*.<sup>58</sup> Others like Robertson referred to such examples as at least a kind of literal hermeneutics. On the next page Hoekema

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<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 256.

<sup>54</sup> See also Alvin S. Lawhead, "A Problem of Unfulfilled Prophecy in Ezekiel: A Response," *WesTJ* 16 (Fall 1981): 17–9 to the effect that OT passages have to be taken in a non-literal way. Note as well Bavinck as cited by VanGemenen to the effect that the NT requires a spiritualization of the OT—Willem VanGemenen, "Israel as the Hermeneutical Crux in the Interpretation of Prophecy (II)," *WTJ* 46 (1984): 262. Finally, see also LaSor's espousal of a *sensus plenior* to Scripture which he admits goes beyond anything discoverable by grammatico-historical exegetical methods—William S. LaSor, "Prophecy, Inspiration, and *Sensus Plenior*", *TB* 29 (1978): 51–6, 59.

<sup>55</sup> Robertson, p. 298.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 300.

<sup>57</sup> George E. Ladd, "Historic Premillennialism," *The Meaning of the Millennium: Four Views*, Robert G. Clouse, ed. (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1977), p. 20–22.

<sup>58</sup> Hoekema, pp. 209–210.



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claims that prophecies about the restoration of Israel may be fulfilled “*antitypically*—that is, as finally fulfilled in the possession by all of God’s people of the new earth of which Canaan was a type.”<sup>59</sup> But was not Amos 9 also a prophecy about the restoration of Israel? And if so, is Acts 15 figurative fulfillment of Amos 9 or antitypical fulfillment? And is antitypical fulfillment literal or figurative? Hoekema answers none of these questions, but what he calls antitypical fulfillment seems to correspond with what Allis calls non-literal. With this kind of confusion, it is understandable that dispensationalists have many questions about nondispensational hermeneutics. My main point, though, is that confusion (and surely there is also confusion among dispensational thinkers) over whether these practices are literal or non-literal (let alone confusion over what practices are correct) illustrates the need for clearer thinking on this issue.

Raising these issues does not settle them, but we can make some headway while noting hermeneutical differences between the systems. Often nondispensationalists respond to the charge of non-literalism in one of two ways. The first is to counter that dispensationalists also interpret non-literally, for they interpret figures of speech. As I have argued elsewhere,<sup>60</sup> the objection fails to recognize the difference between *kinds* of language (figures of speech, plain language, e.g.) and *methods* of interpreting language.

A second nondispensational response is that they do interpret literally. Both sides claim to interpret literally, and yet they derive different theological systems. This suggests that the difference is not literalism v. non-literalism, but different understandings of what constitutes literal hermeneutics. I think the debate stems from three fundamental issues, viz., the relation of the progress of revelation to the priority of one Testament over the other, the understanding and implications of NT use of the OT, and the understanding and implications of typology. The three are interrelated, but I shall address each independently.

Characteristic of dispensational thought is its emphasis on the progress of revelation. God gives different administering orders for the world at different times, and new orders institute a new dispensation. From OT to NT not everything changes, but most everything becomes clearer.<sup>61</sup> Dispensational and nondispensational thinkers agree that the NT fulfills the OT and is a more complete revelation of God; but there is disagreement as to what that means for the priority of one Testament over the other. Nondispensationalists begin with NT teaching as having priority, and then go back to the OT. Dispensationalists often begin with the OT, but wherever they begin they demand

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<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 211.

<sup>60</sup> See my “Salvation in the OT,” *Tradition and Testament*, John S. & Paul D. Feinberg, eds. (Chicago: Moody, 1981), pp. 47–48.

<sup>61</sup> Ryrie, pp. 33–36.

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that the OT be taken on its own terms rather than reinterpreted in the light of the NT.<sup>62</sup> As Ladd explains:

Here is the basic watershed between a dispensational and a nondispensational theology. Dispensationalism forms its eschatology by a literal interpretation of the Old Testament and then fits the New Testament into it. A nondispensational eschatology forms its theology from the explicit teaching of the New Testament.<sup>63</sup>

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Ladd's basic point appears correct, but why such a difference? I think in part the answer stems from this matter of the progress of revelation. Bavinck claims, for example, that since the language of OT prophecies is earthly, sensual, one must look for the spiritual, eternal truth hidden in the earthly forms.<sup>64</sup> To find the spiritual, go to the NT, for "the New Testament views itself as the spiritual and hence as the complete and true fulfillment of the Old Testament."<sup>65</sup> The NT clearly has priority, for it emphasizes the spiritual, and is thus a higher form of revelation.

Not all nondispensationalists accept Bavinck's disjunction of the Testaments as earthly *v.* spiritual, but they do generally agree that the NT as fulfillment must have priority. The OT is viewed as provisional, the shadows, whereas the NT is viewed as the reality. A major reason for holding this is that so much of the OT system is removed as unnecessary with the coming of Christ.<sup>66</sup> E. F. Kevan makes the point by arguing that when an idea passes from the OT to the NT, "*interpretation must emerge from the dispensational character of prophecy as determined by the Covenants.*"<sup>67</sup> He means that the dispensation during which a prophecy is given "determines the outward material forms of the prophecy."<sup>68</sup> The prophet must speak in terms meaningful to his own day. However, that does not end the matter, for understanding the historical circumstances surrounding the prophecy does not tell us its fulfillment. As Kevan explains:

This means that we take the prophet to mean exactly what he says— "literalistically" (except in cases of obvious and declared metaphor)—though the

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<sup>62</sup> See David P. Scaer, "Lutheran Viewpoints on the Challenge of Fundamentalism: Eschatology," *Con J* 10 (January 1984): 9 on the autonomy of the OT in what he calls the fundamentalist understanding of prophecy.

<sup>63</sup> Ladd, pp. 20–21.

<sup>64</sup> H. Bavinck, *Gereformeerde dogmatiek* (Kampen: J. H. Kok, 1930), p. 635. Cited in VanGemeren, p. 261.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 641 (cited in VanGemeren, p. 262).

<sup>66</sup> That was the point of Allis' comment on p. 256 of *Prophecy and the Church*. This is ultimately Ladd's point as cited from his "Historic Premillennialism" article. See also Wolff, pp. 456–457.

<sup>67</sup> E. F. Kevan, "The Covenants and the Interpretation of the Old Testament," *EvQ* 26 (1954): 24.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*

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*fulfillment* of what he says may greatly transcend both what he knows and the terms he uses.<sup>69</sup>

One further point should be made before responding to this issue. In discussing Bavinck and the line of interpretation stemming from him, VanGemeran notes that the basic rule of thumb became the notion that “whatever the NT did not explicitly affirm was rejected and OT prophetic language was typologically interpreted.”<sup>70</sup> This appears to be an apt description of the general nondispensational approach to the OT, not just treatment of OT prophecy.

From the preceding it seems fair to conclude that the priority of the NT typically stressed by nondispensationalists rests at least in part on a notion of progressive revelation which sees the NT as completion of the OT. But progress of revelation is crucial to dispensational systems. Do dispensationalists simply err in not realizing that progressive revelation argues for priority of the NT? I think not.

The crucial point is *how we know* whether something in the OT (especially prophecy about Israel’s future) is still binding in the NT. My response is twofold. If an OT prophecy or promise is made unconditionally to a given people and is still unfulfilled to them even in the NT era, then the prophecy must still be fulfilled to them. While a prophecy given unconditionally to Israel has a fulfillment for the church if the NT *applies* it to the church, it must also be fulfilled to Israel. Progress of revelation cannot cancel unconditional promises.

My second response relates to whether something must be repeated in the NT to remain in force. If the NT explicitly rejects an OT institution, etc., it is canceled. But if God makes a point once (the OT), why must he repeat it in the NT for it still to be true and operative? So long as he neither explicitly or implicitly rejects the OT teaching, why assume it is canceled just because the NT does not repeat it? To argue that it is canceled because it is not repeated is a classic case of arguing from silence. On the other hand, it is not arguing from silence to claim it is still in force despite the NT’s silence, *because God has already in the OT broken the silence and given us his thinking.*

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<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.* See also A. B. Davidson, *Old Testament Prophecy* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1904), p. 169 as cited by Kevan (p. 24): “The true way to regard prophecy is to accept it literally as the meaning of the prophet — the only meaning which in his time he could have — but to say, as to fulfillment, that the form of the kingdom of God is now altered, and altered finally, never to return to its old form; and so fulfillment will not take place in the form of the prediction, but in an altered form; but still the truth of the prophecy will, no doubt, be realized.” See also Kevan, p. 25–27. for a suggested methodology for handling OT prophecies.

<sup>70</sup> VanGemeran, p. 268.

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Some may respond that the key word here is “implicit.” While God may not explicitly negate OT promises to Israel in the NT, he surely does implicitly by applying them to the church. My response is that the promises cannot be canceled even implicitly *if they are made unconditionally!*

In sum, lack of repetition in the NT does not render an OT teaching inoperative during the NT era so long as nothing explicitly or implicitly cancels it. The unconditionality of the promises to Israel guarantees that the NT does not even implicitly remove those promises from Israel. OT civil and ceremonial laws and institutions are shadows and are explicitly removed in the NT. But unconditional promises are not shadows, nor are the peoples to whom they are given.

Despite the preceding, nondispensationalists may claim that they are merely following the NT pattern (e.g., Joel 2:28/Acts 2:16–17; Amos 9:11–12/Acts 15:16–18; Hos 11:1/Matt 2:15) of handling the OT.<sup>71</sup> Thus, explicit reinterpretation of OT promises to Israel apparently does indicate their cancellation for Israel.

Initially, one can say that continuity systems tend to appeal to this pattern of handling the OT as grounds for thinking that the NT meaning becomes the OT meaning, or that the OT passage’s meaning in its context is unimportant, or both. Systems that tend toward discontinuity usually claim this pattern does not entail a substitution of the NT meaning for the OT meaning; the meaning of both passages in their contexts must be upheld.<sup>72</sup>

But what about the nondispensationalist’s point? Does this practice provide the pattern and/or prescription for handling OT prophecies (especially those about Israel’s future)? Does it negate or minimize the import of the OT passage’s meaning in its own context? I think not. Patterns and descriptions are not prescriptions. Because something is done a certain way does not mandate it as right or the only way.<sup>73</sup> Moreover, studies like S. Lewis Johnson’s *The Old Testament in the New* show that there is no such thing as *the NT pattern*

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<sup>71</sup> Elsewhere (“Salvation in the Old Testament,” pp. 46–47) I have made some initial comments on the problems that arise when one ignores the OT passage in its own context. In the case of the Hos 11:1/Matt 2:15 example, if one substitutes the NT meaning for the OT passage, he cancels a clear reference to a past (from Hosea’s perspective) historical event.

<sup>72</sup> In fairness, I must admit that I have seen some dispensationalists so try to uphold the distinction between Israel and the church and so emphasize that the OT must have its independence interpretively from the NT that they have done exegetical gymnastics to show that, for example, Acts 2 is really not that (in any sense) which was spoken by Joel, but like it. Such discontinuity is unnecessarily radical.

<sup>73</sup> See my “Truth: Relationship of Theories of Truth to Hermeneutics,” *Hermeneutics, Inerrancy, and the Bible*, Earl Radmacher and Robert Preus, eds. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), pp. 4, 16 for a fuller explanation of this point.

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of OT usage. There are varieties of NT uses of the OT.<sup>74</sup> In addition, Palmer Robertson cogently argues and illustrates the point that the way one NT writer uses an OT passage does not control how others will use the same passage.<sup>75</sup> This underscores that there is no single NT pattern of OT usage. Moreover, if the NT reinterpretation becomes the OT passage's meaning, how can one determine what the OT passage means since the NT may reinterpret it several different ways? And what remains constant for the meaning of OT passages which are reapplied in the NT?

Finally, NT application of the OT passage does not necessarily eliminate the passage's original meaning. No NT writer claims his new understanding of the OT passage cancels the meaning of the OT passage in its own context or that the new application is the only meaning of the OT passage. The NT writer merely offers a different application of an OT passage than the OT might have foreseen; he is not claiming the OT understanding is now irrelevant. Double fulfillment, then, is necessitated by the NT's application of the passage to the church and by maintaining the integrity of the OT's meaning, especially in view of the unconditional nature of the promises to Israel.

Having heard the preceding, one might reject it because he thinks typology and the shadow character of the OT make the NT meaning crucial after all. This objection and the understanding of typology behind it is fairly well entrenched in nondispensational thinking.<sup>76</sup> In fact, the more one considers the OT as a shadow and type (a type which fades as shadow in virtue of the antitype), the more his system stresses continuity.

Dispensationalists recognize types too, but they differ in their understanding of typology and its implications for the relation of the Testaments. Nondispensational systems stress that the type is shadow and the antitype is reality; therefore, the meaning of the antitype supersedes and cancels the meaning of the type in its own context. Dispensationalists do not think types necessarily are shadows, and they demand that both type and antitype

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<sup>74</sup> See S. Lewis Johnson, *The Old Testament in the New. An Argument for Biblical Inspiration* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1980); Jack Weir, "Analogous Fulfillment: The Use of the Old Testament in the New Testament," *PRS* 9 (Spring 1982): 67–9; and Samuel Ballentine, "The Interpretation of the Old Testament in the New Testament," *SwJT* 23 (1980–81) for several studies on the ways the NT uses the OT. As they note, some of those uses take the OT in the same sense the OT writer used.

<sup>75</sup> O. Palmer Robertson, "Genesis 15:6: New Covenant Expositions of an Old Covenant Text," *WTJ* 42 (Spring 1980): 279–81.

<sup>76</sup> Note, for example, Hoekema's comments on typological interpretation, p. 211; Allis' complaint to the same effect in regard to Dispensationalism, p. 256; and Mark W. Karlberg, "Legitimate Discontinuities Between the Testaments," *JETS* 28 (March 1985): 16, 18 (especially in footnote) and 19 where he makes the point on his own as well as citing Berkhof, Fairbairn, and Allis to the same effect. See also Patrick Fairbairn (*The Interpretation of Prophecy* and *The Typology of Scripture*, 2 vols.) as discussed in VanGemeren, pp. 260, 267. Finally, see also Wolff, pp. 456–461, who initially calls the relation between OT and NT persons, events, etc., analogy, but then speaks of typological interpretation.

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be given their due meanings in their own contexts while maintaining a typological relation to one another.

David Baker's work on typology sheds light on this debate. Baker notes that typology rests on correspondence or analogy between two objects, persons, or events. There are two main kinds of correspondence. One he calls vertical, a relationship between heavenly and earthly realities, and the other horizontal, a relationship between an earlier and later historical fact. Biblical writers are more interested in the horizontal than the vertical kind.<sup>77</sup> Baker notes key misconceptions about typology and offers the corrective. First, typology is neither allegory nor symbolism. In either allegory or symbolism there is little import placed on the facticity of the symbol or allegory. Each item is a signpost to something more important. But typology is concerned with relationships between historical facts.<sup>78</sup> Second, typology is not exegesis. Baker writes:

The biblical text has only one meaning, its literal meaning, and this is to be found by means of grammatical-historical study. If the author intended a typical significance it will be clear in the text. And if we see a typical significance not perceived by the original author it must be consistent with the literal meaning. Typology is not an exegesis or interpretation of a text but a study of relationships between events, persons and institutions recorded in biblical texts.<sup>79</sup>

Finally, many think types prefigure something future. Baker rejects this, not because types in no way are future-oriented, but in the sense that if types only prefigure the future, they must have some meaning other than what is apparent at the time. Baker counters:

It is only in retrospect that an event, person or institution may be seen as typical. The existence of types necessitates there being other events, persons or institutions (earlier or later) of which they are typical.<sup>80</sup>

The implications for our discussion are quite significant. We have already seen that though some of the OT was indeed provisional and a shadow, not all of it was. Proper understanding of typology informs us that even if the NT interprets the OT typologically and even if we are to do so, that does not allow us to ignore or cancel the meaning of the type or substitute the meaning of the antitype for it. If types were allegories or symbols, that could be done. But they are not. They are concrete historical events, persons,

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<sup>77</sup> David L. Baker, "Typology and the Christian Use of the Old Testament," *SJT* 29 (April 1976): 146–8.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 150.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 149.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 152.

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promises. They look to the future, but not in a way that makes their meaning equivalent to the antitype. Moreover, if the NT antitype cancels the meaning of the OT type, the NT must tell us so. NT reinterpretations of OT passages are neither explicit nor implicit cancellations of the meaning of the OT. Likewise, NT antitypes neither explicitly nor implicitly cancel the meaning of OT types. Thinking they do misunderstands typology.

In sum, dispensational hermeneutics ignores neither progress of revelation, nor the provisional nature of much in the OT, nor typology. However, these items are used by nondispensational systems to stress the priority of the NT over the OT. Generally, the more one emphasizes continuity, the more one places priority on the NT as normative for the understanding of the OT. And generally the more one stresses discontinuity, the more he takes each Testament on its own and the less he tends to see one Testament's understanding as normative for the other. My contention is that understanding that both type and antitype must have their own meaning even while bearing a typological relation to the other, understanding the implications of NT reinterpretation of the OT, and realizing that progress of revelation only renders earlier truth inoperative if God says so leads one to see that the meaning of both OT and NT passages must be maintained.

## COVENANT PROMISES TO ISRAEL

From the preceding discussion it should be evident that a crucial difference between continuity and discontinuity systems is their understanding of the covenants. Often the issue is stated simplistically that OT covenants like the Abrahamic and Davidic are viewed as conditional by nondispensationalists and unconditional by dispensationalists.<sup>81</sup> Allis, for example, thinks the Abrahamic Covenant is conditional despite apparently unconditional language in Gen 12:1–3. Often there is an unstated condition implicit in a covenant which explicitly appears unconditional. For example, Allis reminds us that Jonah preached unconditional judgment on Nineveh, but when Nineveh repented, God spared her. Thus, there must have been an implicit condition. Allis claims we must generally understand covenantal language in this way.<sup>82</sup>

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<sup>81</sup> Of course, all agree that the Mosaic Covenant was conditional. Built into the very fabric of the covenant were instructions on what would happen if one broke it, what would happen if one didn't, and how to be reinstated in blessing if one did break it. In talking about unconditional covenants, dispensationalists are not saying that no covenants have ever been conditional, but only that covenants like the Abrahamic, Davidic, Palestinian are unconditional. For an excellent study of the history of Reformed interpretation of the Mosaic Covenant see Mark W. Karlberg, "Reformed Interpretation of the Mosaic Covenant," *WTJ* 43 (Fall 1980).

<sup>82</sup> Allis, p. 32.

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While conditional *v.* unconditional interpretation of covenants may aptly portray some nondispensationalists vis-a-vis dispensationalists, it is not true in all cases. Some dispensationalists argue that while nondispensationalists typically interpret the covenants as conditional, dispensationalists see both a conditional and an unconditional element. What is unconditional is that God will fulfill the covenants to Israel. On the other hand, not every last Jew, ethnically speaking, will receive the benefits of those promises. Individual blessing under the promises is always conditioned upon obedience to the God who made the covenant. So, the particular Jews who experience the blessings of Israel's promises are those who form the believing remnant of Jews throughout history. Unconditional promises guarantee that some Jews will experience covenanted blessings; through their obedience *we* learn who is of that believing remnant.<sup>83</sup>

While one might think this ends the matter, it does not. I agree that there is both a conditional and an unconditional element to the promises as just explained, but that does not entirely explain the difference between dispensational and nondispensational systems. In *The Christ of the Covenants* Robertson takes basically the same view,<sup>84</sup> but he is a nondispensationalist. That suggests that the difference between the systems over this issue stems from something else. Through a series of points about the covenants, the real difference becomes evident.

First, note the addressees of OT covenant promises. They are biological Jews addressed as a nation. That does not mean the covenants cannot apply to or even speak of Gentiles. It only means they are addressed to and are primarily about national Israel. Second, the covenant promises contain an unconditional element. The particular Israelites who realize them are the believing remnant, but their unconditionality for the nation necessitates a fulfillment to the believing remnant as a corporate entity.

Third, the promises involve not only spiritual blessings, but also social, political, and economic blessings. I think the ultimate difference on the covenants between dispensational and nondispensational systems is not just conditionality *v.* unconditionality, but which aspect(s) of the covenant promises one emphasizes. Robertson, after making the same point I have about conditional and unconditional elements in the covenants, then focuses almost exclusively on the spiritual aspect of covenant blessings.<sup>85</sup> Dispensationalists demand that one emphasize the variety of

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<sup>83</sup> Not only is this my point, but Walvoord makes the same point in his "Grace," pp. 105–106.

<sup>84</sup> Robertson, pp. 246–248.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 249ff. In addition, throughout the book Robertson's emphasis is on the spiritual aspects of the covenants.



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elements of covenant blessing, not just the spiritual.<sup>86</sup> In general, the more continuity-oriented one's system, the more one emphasizes the spiritual aspect of the blessings alone and the greater tendency to see the covenants as conditional. The more discontinuity-oriented one's system, the greater the emphasis on all elements of covenant blessing and the greater the stress on the unconditional element in them.

Some argue against distinguishing various aspects of covenant blessing, for the covenants are all of one piece. But even granting the point, it helps the dispensationalist. All he asks is to take seriously the need for the whole of covenant promises to be realized sometime in the life of the nation to which they were addressed unconditionally.

Fourth, the preceding is inconsequential if the covenants have already been fulfilled to the nation Israel. One or another element of covenant blessing may have been experienced at one time or another, but the total complex of promises (spiritual and material), meant to be fulfilled simultaneously, has never been realized conjointly in the history of this nation.<sup>87</sup> This fact plus the other three necessitates a future fulfillment of covenant promises to the believing remnant of the nation Israel.

Continuity and discontinuity systems differ over the covenants in the ways mentioned. Because of his understanding of covenant promises, the dispensationalist argues that many OT prophecies of future blessing for Israel not only *can* have double fulfillment (once each for Israel and the church) but *must*. Likewise, based on that understanding, they claim that multiple senses of terms like "Jew" must be upheld in both Testaments.

## DISTINCTIVE FUTURE FOR ETHNIC ISRAEL

From the preceding it is clear that holding a distinctive future for ethnic Israel is essential to Dispensationalism. This matter involves several issues: is the church a continuation and/or replacement of Israel, what sort of future can national Israel expect, and how should one understand the nature of the kingdom? Comments in this section and the next address all three.

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<sup>86</sup> For those who think this overemphasizes the material, and not the spiritual, I respond that their objection smacks of Platonism. And if one cannot take the material elements of the promises literally, how does he know he can take the spiritual elements literally? For those who counterrespond that one must take the spiritual elements seriously because the NT clearly does, I reply that failure, if there is one, to mention all aspects of the promises does not, as already noted, necessarily cancel them. And it is also dubious that the NT does not in fact claim that all the OT promises to Israel are still in effect—cf. Paul's comments in Rom 11:29 after his lengthy argument that Israel has not been cast aside. Given Rom 11:29, God's gifts and calling to Israel are still in operation. The OT covenants to Israel and passages like Ezekiel 36–37, Isaiah 60, and Zephaniah 3 define what the gifts are.

<sup>87</sup> See, for example, Deut 30:1–10; 2 Sam 7:4–17; Jer 31:31–34; Ezek 36:29–38; Isaiah 60.

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Historically there have been many positions on Israel,<sup>88</sup> and most have denied a distinctive future for Israel as a nation. Dispensationalism's distinctness can be seen through a brief synopsis of positions on this question.

An initial amillennial view sees earthly promises made to Israel as symbolic and typical. As such, they are fulfilled in Christ.<sup>89</sup> In addition, many who hold this position claim that even if the promises relate literally to Israel, they were conditional, and Israel lost the promises through disobedience. Israel's promises are to be fulfilled spiritually in the current age through Christ's reign in the church<sup>90</sup> and ultimately in the eternal state with the new heavens and earth.<sup>91</sup> Individual Jews may be saved and incorporated into the church, but there will be no material kingdom and no special emphasis on Israel.

A second amillennial position agrees that OT promises are realized in the church and that individual Jews are incorporated into the church by faith in Christ. However, because of passages like Rom 11:25–27, proponents expect a great ingathering of Jews to the church at the end of the age before the Lord's return and the establishment of the eternal state.<sup>92</sup>

Willem VanGemen offers a third Reformed position.<sup>93</sup> He thinks too much traditional Reformed thinking has spiritualized OT promises to Israel and transferred them to the church, spiritual Israel.<sup>94</sup> Those promises to Israel must be taken seriously. Relying on Calvin's notion of the progressive realization of the promises, VanGemen claims the way to take them seriously is to see them fulfilled historically more than once. They may have been fulfilled during OT times, during the current age in the church, and they await

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<sup>88</sup> See Robert L. Saucy, "A Rationale for the Future of Israel," *JETS* 28 (December 1985): 433–4 on four different perspectives on the mission of Israel. See also Karlberg, "Legitimate Discontinuities," pp. 15–18 on different views of the relation of Israel to the future. Finally, see VanGemen, pp. 254–260–262. and Willem VanGemen, "Review Articles: Israel as the Hermeneutical Crux in the Interpretation of Prophecy," *WTJ* 45 (Spring 1983): 142–4 on differing views within the Reformed tradition.

<sup>89</sup> Karlberg, "Legitimate Discontinuities," pp. 15–16, 19.

<sup>90</sup> Note thinkers like Herbert Huffmon, "The Israel of God," *Int* 23 (January 1969); R. J. M. Gurney, "The Seventy Weeks of Daniel 9:24–27," *EvQ* 53 (January–March 1981); Henry S. Gehman, "The Covenant – The Old Testament Foundation of the Church," *TToday* 7 (April 1950); and O. Palmer Robertson, "Tongues: Sign of Covenantal Curse and Blessing," *WTJ* 38 (Fall 1975): 47–8 to the effect that Israel as a nation has lost the promises and been replaced by the church.

<sup>91</sup> Karlberg, "Legitimate Discontinuities," p. 19.

<sup>92</sup> See, for example, Geerhardus Vos as discussed by VanGemen, "Israel as the Hermeneutical Crux (II)," pp. 263–264; O. Palmer Robertson, "Is There a Distinctive Future for Ethnic Israel in Romans 11?," Kenneth Kantzer and Stanley Gundry, eds., *Perspectives on Evangelical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1979); and possibly Calvin, although as VanGemen shows in both articles on Israel and the hermeneutical crux, Calvin's position on the future of Israel was not entirely clear.

<sup>93</sup> Karlberg, "Legitimate Discontinuities," p. 16 labels this view the "new Dutch Reformed" position.

<sup>94</sup> VanGemen, "Review Article," p. 143.

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a future fulfillment when Christ returns and restores all things.<sup>95</sup> “Fulfillment is then not a state of perfection. Fulfillment is a process which takes us through the OT, NT, and the history of the church.”<sup>96</sup>

VanGemenen’s approach means that Israel can hope to partake of the blessings in every generation.<sup>97</sup> Does this mean Israel will ultimately realize in a literal way everything promised her in the OT? VanGemenen does not say yes, but he would not rule out that possibility. Realization of the hope is certain, but hope excludes certainty as to how. VanGemenen explains:

Hope *excludes* the certainty of millennial (pre-, post-, a-) schemata. Hope is focused in Jesus Christ as the author and finisher of our faith, the Alpha and Omega.... Hope humbly admits that it does not know the time or the manner of fulfillment, because of our “partial” knowledge and our limited vision (1 Cor 13:12). On the other hand, hope does not exclude a future for Israel as part of the people of God, nor of some future large-scale conversion (Rom 11:25–29). Hope does not delimit the benefits of Christ’s atonement to “spiritual” in this age and to “spiritual” and “material” in the age to come.<sup>98</sup>

Postmillennialists view OT promises of a kingdom fulfilled both materially and spiritually. Spread of and response to the gospel will eventually usher in an indefinitely long golden age materially and spiritually. There will be no specific emphasis on Israel. As with other people, individual Jews will be blessed as they enter the church through faith in Christ.

Nondispensational premillennialists expect Christ to reign a literal 1000 years on earth. Christ reigns spiritually over his church now, but someday he will reign over all the earth. The effects will be social, political, economic and spiritual. Individual Jews will benefit through their membership in the church. Some proponents of this view even expect a great national ingathering of Israelites at the end of the age. However, when the kingdom in its fullness is here, it will have no particular Jewish flavor or emphasis.<sup>99</sup>

Finally, dispensationalists generally hold one of two views. According to both, OT promises for Israel plus Rev 20:1–10 demand a literal, earthly kingdom of 1000 years. It will be a time of great blessings for all peoples, but there will be special emphasis on

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<sup>95</sup> VanGemenen, “Israel as the Hermeneutical Crux (II),” pp. 274–280.

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 279.

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 284ff.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 295–296.

<sup>99</sup> Someone like G. E. Ladd would probably best fit into this category along with other covenant premillennialists. See Ladd, “Historic Premillennialism.”

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Israel. Kingdom promises belong to all saved Israelites from all ages. Because of passages like Zech 12:10ff., Matt 24:29–30, and Rom 11:25–27, dispensationalists expect a great ingathering of Jews to Christ at the end of the tribulation as they “look on me, the one they have pierced” (Zech 12:10). Jews saved during the church age are members of it and find their identity with it. But OT Jewish saints and Jewish tribulation saints after the rapture will form the believing remnant of Israelites who see the fulfillment of the OT promises to Israel in a 1000-year earthly kingdom.<sup>100</sup> The basic distinction here among dispensationalists is that older ones tended to see the kingdom relegated entirely to the future. More contemporary dispensationalists hold that the full realization of the kingdom for Israel and the world awaits the future, but currently spiritual aspects of the kingdom are operative in the church.<sup>101</sup>

What is evident from this sketch of views is that only Dispensationalism clearly sees a distinctive future for ethnic Israel as a nation. This is a dispensational distinctive, and the more one's theological system emphasizes a distinctive future for Israel, the more the system will be a discontinuity system. Conversely, the less there is such emphasis, the more one's system becomes a continuity one.

From my perspective, the church neither replaces nor continues Israel. There will be a distinctive future for ethnic Israel, despite the fact that spiritual aspects of the kingdom are now being applied to the church. Arguments for this view are many, but three will suffice. First, this position is a logical concomitant of the hermeneutics and the position on the covenants already outlined.

Second, both the OT and the NT teach this future. OT prophecies predict a time of spiritual, social, political, and economic blessing for Israel (e.g., Zechariah 12–14; Isaiah 60; Jer 31:27–40; Zeph 3:11–20). Those prophecies are still unfulfilled. Thus, one can reasonably expect a distinctive future for Israel.

In the NT also, even after Israel rejects Christ, a future for Israel is still promised.<sup>102</sup> When Christ is asked (Acts 1:8) whether the kingdom would be restored to Israel, he does not

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<sup>100</sup> That this is fairly standard dispensational fare can be seen by a perusal of such dispensational works as those by A. J. McClain, *The Greatness of the Kingdom* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1959); C. L. Feinberg, *Millennialism: The Two Major Views* (Chicago: Moody, 1980); and J. F. Walvoord, *The Millennial Kingdom* (Findlay, OH: Dunham, 1959).

<sup>101</sup> Robert L. Saucy, “Contemporary Dispensational Thought,” *TFSBul* 7 (March–April 1984): 10–1 nicely makes this distinction.

<sup>102</sup> As to why so little is mentioned about the physical aspects of the blessing, see VanGemen's (“Israel as the Hermeneutical Crux [II],” pp. 293–294) fine discussion; while I think his explanation is part of the point, I think the basic point again is that once having made the promise, God need not repeat it. The key thing Israel would need to know is whether it could still expect spiritual salvation, for spiritual

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say Israel forfeited the kingdom. He replies that the disciples could not know the timing of these events and that in the meantime they were to do another job. Christ's response hardly sounds as though Israel lost the kingdom forever.<sup>103</sup> Moreover, Paul seems to settle the issue in Rom 11:25–29. Not only does he predict the future salvation of Israel as a nation, but concludes his whole discussion on Israel's position by saying that "God's gifts and his call are irrevocable." What can this mean other than what God has promised Israel, he will deliver? And the OT clarifies the promises.

Finally, a distinctive future is a logical outgrowth of God's election of Israel. Berkouwer, not a dispensationalist, rightly asks in regard to this matter:

Can a past that has been qualified by election ever come to naught? Can 'election of God' as we usually understand it ever be changed into 'rejection'? Can the Church inherit the place of the chosen people of Israel, so that election passes over to the church? Do we not usually consider God's election as something irrevocable, definitive, and all-powerful; and is it consequently meaningless to assume that the election of Israel could be negated by human reaction, even unbelief?<sup>104</sup>

## THE CHURCH AS A DISTINCTIVE ORGANISM

A fifth distinctive of Dispensationalism is the belief that the church is a distinctive organism. By this, dispensationalists mean that the church does not begin until the NT era (most say at Pentecost). They also mean the church did not exist in any form in the

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restoration was always the key to material blessing. Therefore, promising that God will still bring the people back to himself spiritually was, in effect, everything needed to reassure that all the blessings were still in place.

<sup>103</sup> Some may claim this is an argument from silence, but I think not. In the context of a direct question about the kingdom, the Lord could have told the disciples they were wrong about the kingdom, but he didn't. While it is always possible that he may have thought that they had forfeited the kingdom but just did not say so, it seems highly improbable. Others will respond with Matt 21:43. However, it is crucial to note that Jesus is speaking to the chief priests and Pharisees, and that they perceived that he had specifically spoken of them (5:45). Of course, this judgment upon them would also apply to any Israelite who failed to meet the spiritual entrance requirements of the kingdom. Since the vast majority of the Jews of Jesus' day rejected him, the kingdom was taken from them. But other passages already mentioned necessitate that it not be lost to all Israel forever. So, rather than showing that God has canceled the promises for Israel altogether, the verse (especially when taken with other passages that show the promises are still in force) merely underscores the principle that even with an unconditional covenant, blessing under that covenant is always conditioned on belief and obedience.

<sup>104</sup> G. C. Berkouwer, *The Return of Christ* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972), pp. 326–327. This does not mean Berkouwer expects Israel's election to be expressed exactly as the dispensationalist does, but his fundamental point is correct. If God elects someone or some group and unconditionally promises them something (salvation or whatever), he can be expected to do it. Election cannot be overturned.

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OT.<sup>105</sup> In the OT and NT eras, people are always saved by grace through faith in the truth God has revealed; but being saved is not the only defining characteristic of the church. A new organism began at Pentecost.<sup>106</sup>

As a dispensationalist, I believe the church is a distinctive NT organism which began at Pentecost. There are various reasons for the view, but several will suffice. First, according to 1 Cor 12:13, when a believer in the current age trusts Christ as Savior, he is baptized by the Holy Spirit into the body of Christ. But this activity apparently began on the Day of Pentecost. People were saved and the Spirit was operative in OT times, but I see no evidence that being saved in the OT involved being brought into the body of Christ, an organism wherein believers are united to Christ and one another.

A related point is that the NT speaks of the believer as ἐν Χριστῷ. That phrase refers to the believer's union with Christ and the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. As C. F. D. Moule has argued, the phrase became a technical term in the NT.<sup>107</sup> While the Holy Spirit came upon people in the OT on special occasions to perform special tasks, this differs from the constant indwelling of the Holy Spirit and the abiding with Christ spoken of in John 15. Moreover, salvation is always grounded in the atoning work of Christ, and in that sense all believers are in Christ; but as explained, the NT ἐν Χριστῷ relation involves more than just being saved on the basis of Christ's blood.

Third, according to Eph 4:15 and Col 1:18, Christ is head of the church. However, Eph 1:19–23 (esp. vv. 22–23) says Christ became head of the church upon his conquest of death

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<sup>105</sup> Traditionally, the opinion has been that the church was in the OT. See the following creeds: The Scotch Confession of Faith (1560), Arts. 5, 16; The Belgic Confession (1561), Art. 27; The Heidelberg Catechism (1563), Questions 54–55; The Second Helvetic Confession (1566), Art. 17; The Irish Articles of Religion (1615), Art. 68; The Westminster Confession of Faith (1647), Chap. 25; The Savoy Declaration (1658), Chap. 26; and The Baptist Confession of 1688, Chap. 26. See also the comments of thinkers like Samuel Newell, "Many Members," *Int* 5 (October 1951): 415; W. Stanford Reid, "The New Testament Belief in an Old Testament Church," *EvQ* 24 (October 1952); and Huffmon.

<sup>106</sup> For an interesting discussion by a nondispensationalist on the differences between OT and NT churches see Calvin as discussed by VanGemeren, "Israel as the Hermeneutical Crux (II)," p. 280. Note also the interesting statement by Reid, p. 204: "Another difference between the two dispensations appears at Pentecost. In the Old Testament economy the Spirit of God came upon God's people, upon the elect and in special ways upon such men as David and the prophets (John 7:39; 1 Peter 1:10, 11). With the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost the Church became the mystical body of Christ. This it could not be until He was glorified. Once, however, that had taken place, then the Spirit came upon the Church as a whole, forming it into one body. Moreover He came upon the Church to remain with permanently and to dwell within it. Thus the New Testament Church is possessed of a spiritual power unknown to Old Testament saints. God's Spirit, it is true, dwelt within them also, but only as individuals, not as the body of Christ." This surely sounds much like a dispensationalist and causes one to wonder why he then says the church is in the OT.

<sup>107</sup> C. F. D. Moule, *The Phenomenon of the New Testament* (Naperville, IL: Allenson, 1967), chapter 2.

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through the resurrection and ascension. It stands to reason that an unresurrected Christ would hardly serve as head of a body which has conquered sin and its penalty, death. But if Christ becomes head of the church after his resurrection and ascension, the church must be a NT organism.

Finally, 1 Corinthians 12 and Eph 4:11–12 teach that Christ gave to the church through the Holy Spirit spiritual gifts for the work of the ministry. Each believer receives his/her gift(s) upon being saved and baptized into the body of Christ (1 Cor 12:11–13). But Eph 4:8 indicates that Christ did not give those gifts to the church until he ascended on high. If the church is an organism of spiritually gifted people, and if Christ did not begin giving those gifts until after the ascension, one is led to conclude that the church did not exist until the NT.<sup>108</sup>

The foregoing gives some of the flavor of dispensational thinking. In general, the more one's system moves toward discontinuity, the more one sees the church as a distinctive organism. Likewise, the less one sees distinction, the more his system tends toward continuity.

## PHILOSOPHY OF HISTORY

Ryrie claims that distinctive to Dispensationalism is the idea that God uses history to bring himself glory.<sup>109</sup> I disagree, because I cannot imagine nondispensational Calvinist, for example, who would say anything different. However, I think dispensational and nondispensational systems do differ on their emphases in regard to what God is doing with history. In many ways, this difference underlies many of the other distinctives already mentioned.

For nondispensationalists history is seen primarily as salvation history. In other words, the emphasis is on God's ongoing plan in saving men. For dispensationalists history is the gradual implementation and outworking of the kingdom of God. A major part of that implementation involves saving people, but the soteriological and spiritual elements are not the only aspects of the kingdom. None of this is meant to suggest that nondispensationalists are disinterested in the social, political, economic implications of God's workings on earth or that dispensationalists think these other items are more

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<sup>108</sup> Often dispensationalists make much out of the statement in Ephesians 3 that the church is a mystery. Normally they take that to mean that the church was not revealed or around in the OT. Though I am not convinced the argument is entirely useless, usual statements of it are not entirely convincing. For a presentation and discussion of the argument see Charles Ryrie, "The Mystery in Ephesians 3," *BSac* 123 (January 1966): 28–30 especially. More compelling for me is Paul's reference to the church in Eph 2:15 as the *καινός ἀνθρώπος* (*καινός* referring to "new as to kind," as opposed to *νέος*, "more current").

<sup>109</sup> Ryrie, *Dispensationalism Today*, pp. 46–47.

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important than what God is doing to save men and women. The point is simply a matter of emphasis. For example, nondispensational treatments of the nature of the covenants and of Israel's future invariably emphasize soteriological and spiritual issues, whereas dispensational treatments emphasize both the spiritual/soteriological and the social, economic, and political aspects of things.<sup>110</sup>

In a real sense, this is a critical watershed for continuity and discontinuity systems. The more one stresses redemption history to the exclusion of God's other works in the world, the more one's system becomes a continuity system, for all sides agree that soteriologically the same basic things are happening from one Testament to another. On the other hand, the more one stresses the multi-faceted aspects of God's workings in history, the more his system becomes a discontinuity system, for God does not always work with and through the same peoples, nor does he have the same social and political program for each group.

## SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

Historically, evangelical theologies have emphasized more the continuity between the Testaments, but that does not mean there have been no discontinuity systems. In comparing my discontinuity/dispensational system to other more traditional ones, one would probably think it much closer to continuity systems than dispensational systems usually are, and I agree. My concern is not the label attached to my views, but that certain key concepts be emphasized. Since the six items set forth (however nuanced) are distinctive and foundational to all dispensational systems, I consider myself a dispensationalist.

In the final analysis, is there greater continuity or discontinuity between the Testaments? Since I see both to a large degree, and since it is hard to quantify the amounts of each, I find the question difficult to answer. My contention is that while both discontinuity and continuity systems recognize both elements, the six conceptual items mentioned are rarely held by continuity systems in the way set forth, and each item emphasizes

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<sup>110</sup> See, for example, comments by Robertson in *Christ of the Covenants*; E. F. Kevan, "The Covenants and the Interpretation of the Old Testament"; and Hoekema, p. 195. Though each says many things about the covenants with which I agree, in the final analysis the elements of the covenants they emphasize are soteriological. In addition, ask a covenant theologian to sketch the essence of his system and invariably he will begin with a discussion of the covenant of works, the covenant of grace, and the covenant of redemption. But, of course, all of these relate to soteriology; and when they are made the basic categories for understanding Scripture, it becomes obvious why covenantal systems usually emphasize soteriology to the exclusion of other issues.



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significant discontinuity between the Testaments. *From that perspective* I see more discontinuity between the Testaments than others do, and my system qualifies as a discontinuity system. My hope is that by clarifying the foundational principles of Dispensationalism, both proponents and critics of the system will be encouraged to discuss issues at the heart of our differences, not peripheral matters of application. If that should happen, the discussion will be furthered, and we all will see that we have far more in common than in disagreement.<sup>111</sup>

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<sup>111</sup> Feinberg, J. S. (1988). "Systems of Discontinuity." In J. S. Feinberg (Ed.), *Continuity and discontinuity: perspectives on the relationship between the Old and New Testaments: essays in honor of S. Lewis Johnson, Jr.* (pp. 63–86). Crossway Books.