

Is Dispensationalism Hurting American Political Policies in the Middle East?

“It’s hard to believe, but the Bush administration’s foreign policy and the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq are influenced by the writings of a cave-dwelling hermit who had apocalyptic visions some 2000 years ago.”¹ Such a claim, in spite of its clear overstatement, nonetheless echoes a belief that is held by religious and political liberals and many conservative evangelicals. Another concerned writer notes that “it is somewhat alarming that swathes of the evangelical community...naively accept a potted version of biblical eschatology in relation to the Middle East which puts them firmly on the side of injustice and post-colonial oppression, as far as most inhabitants of the region are concerned.”²

In a similar vein, a recent edition of *Christianity Today* highlights the analysis of Kevin Phillips, a former Republican strategist, who is apparently quite unaware of the many varieties of evangelicals in America. Phillips, in a stark criticism of dispensationalism (perhaps without knowing the term), complains, “The rapture, end-times, and Armageddon hucksters in the United States rank with any Shiite ayatollahs, and the last two presidential elections mark the transformation of the GOP into the first religious party in U.S. history.”³ Collin Hansen’s *CT* review summarizes Phillips’ massive tome with a test to discover if any individual is contributing to the downfall of the United States—Are you now, or have you ever: (a) attended a megachurch; (b) driven an SUV; (c) read any of the Left Behind books; (d) voted for President Bush; (e) lived in the South. Hansen asserts that the tone of Phillips’ book is that a “yes” answer for two or more of these questions means that you as an individual American are causing America’s downfall.⁴ This means deep trouble for this author. I have in my life been a member of a church of almost 20,000 members. I have read *all* of the Left Behind books in the original series. I voted for Bush *twice* (and his father *twice*). I was born and raised in the southern part of the United States. To add insult to injury I recently bought my first SUV. To those like Phillips I am a hyper-demon responsible for the coming destruction of a once-great country.

The reference above to the Left Behind series of novels by Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins highlights the concern of dispensational theology, which they attempt to portray. The concern of Phillips and other critics of dispensationalism point to its undue influence in American politics especially as it relates to foreign policy related to Israel. This common complaint in our day is somewhat of an enigma. Dispensationalism is viewed as having too much power while at the

¹ Chip Berlet & Nikhil Aziz, “Culture, Religion, Apocalypse, and Middle East Foreign Policy” *Right Web* 5 December 2003, <<http://rightweb.irc-online.org/rw/848>> (accessed 27 September 2006). Berlet and Aziz work at Political Research Associates (www.publiceye.org) which is a self-labeled progressive Boston think tank. The cave-dwelling hermit is, of course, the Apostle John who gave us the book of Revelation. What is being criticized is the dispensational understanding of that New Testament book.

² Peter Wilkinson, “Eschatology and the Middle East” *Open Source Theology* 3 June 2006, <<http://www.opensource.theology.net/node/924>> (accessed 21 September 2006).

³ Kevin P. Phillips, *American Theocracy: The Peril and Politics of Radical Religion, Oil, and Borrowed Money in the 21st Century* (New York: Viking, 2006), vii.

⁴ Collin Hansen, “Logic Left Behind,” *Christianity Today* (September 2006): 126. Hansen’s critique of Phillips is largely and appropriately negative.

same time other historians and theologians are telling us that dispensationalism is in serious decline as a theological option within evangelicalism.⁵

Dispensationalism and Neoconservatism

It is no wonder then that there exists within the politico-religious debates in America a parallel between shrill criticism of dispensational theology and harsh aversion to neoconservatism. The latter is considered to be a movement starting earlier in the twentieth century with once-liberal activists who vigorously opposed communism and have morphed in recent times into a new wing of conservative politics. This group has been intensely pro-Israel in Middle Eastern policies. Many Jews are part of this movement although historically the term does not limit itself to Jewish proponents of the political philosophy. The Bush administration is considered to have too many of this persuasion in critical foreign policy positions. One name that often surfaces is that of Paul Wolfowitz, current President of the World Bank, but formerly the Deputy Secretary of Defense under Donald Rumsfeld from 2001-2005, a time when the Bush Administration was formulating its planned response in the War on Terror.

Dispensationalism has been perhaps the most caricatured and misrepresented theological position within evangelicalism since its rise in the early nineteenth century. Committed to a literal (grammatical-historical) interpretation of the Bible including prophecy, it has always affirmed some form of significant and institutional distinction between Israel and the Church. Dispensationalism has strongly rejected any form of replacement theology in which Israel has been done away with in God's plan for history and thus superseded by the Church. The Church has typically not been defined as simply the collection of all the elect of all ages. Consequently, dispensationalists accept the promises of the Old Testament relative to an ultimate restoration of Israel to its land before and after the return of the Messiah (Jesus Christ) to planet earth.⁶

Usually dispensationalists and political neoconservatives, who disagree perhaps on many social issues, share one fundamental aspect of their world view: Israel has a right to its land in present-day Palestine. Another way to voice this shared belief is to say that most dispensationalists and neoconservatives are Zionists. Dispensationalists would be called *Christian Zionists* although not all Christian Zionists could be labeled as *dispensationalist*. Dispensationalists believe in Israel's right to the land by embracing the biblical prophecies about Israel's land in a straight-forward way. Neoconservatives would come to it from the vantage point of modern geo-politics. Therefore, as a result of the existence of neoconservatives in the present administration coupled with the fact of supposedly easy access for dispensationalists to a self-proclaimed evangelical president, the Bush administration is perceived as favoring Israel over against the Islamic Arabs in Middle-Eastern policies. Over-generalizations of this kind need to be avoided by all parties since Bush's so-called "Roadmap to Peace" includes the establishment of a Palestinian state, something that is not welcomed easily by those with a pro-Israel bent.

⁵ For example, see Ronald M. Henzel, *Darby, Dualism and the Decline of Dispensationalism* (Tuscon, AZ: Fenestra Books, 2003).

⁶ By "before and after" I mean the biblical fact that Israel must be in the land in unbelief during the seven-year tribulation period (70th week of Daniel) and will be part of God's coming kingdom under Christ as a believing nation after He returns at the end of that tribulation period.

The Charge of Racism

In a misrepresentation of dispensationalism, there is the charge that the dispensational view of the Bible, Israel, and the end-times leads to blatant racism and prejudice. One Baptist minister incredibly argues that

Dispensationalists, who are found in many fundamentalist and evangelical denominations, follow the theological beliefs of John Nelson Darby, C. I. Scofield and Hal Lindsey, who taught that ethnic Jews constitute a superior race who are destined to take over Palestine, then the entire Middle East and finally the world. This naturally leads to resentment of Palestinian Arabs, and all other Middle Eastern nations that sympathize with the Palestinians in their resistance to the program of pushing them out of their historic homelands. Dispensationalism, taken to its logical conclusion, leads to racism.⁷

It is hard to take such a paragraph seriously. The writer shows evidence of having never actually read and studied in detail any dispensational writings, including works by the men he names—Darby, Scofield, and Lindsey. Instead, his words come across as a rant that raises the moniker of racism over the heads of those with whom he disagrees.

To parse the charge of racism, one must begin with the claim that dispensationalists teach that “ethnic Jews constitute a *superior* race.” Such a statement is acutely misleading in its use of terms. Dispensationalism teaches that the Jewish people are a *chosen* race, not a *superior* race.⁸ While dispensationalists certainly hold that the Jewish people are *special* in God’s eyes this does not logically imply superiority to other people groups. The Bible is clear on the reason that God chose the Hebrews:

For you (Israel) are a holy people to the LORD your God; the LORD your God has chosen you to be a people for His own possession out of all the peoples⁹ who are on the face of the earth. The Lord did not set His love on you nor choose you because you were more in number than any of the peoples, for you were the fewest of all the peoples, but because the LORD loved you and kept the oath which He swore to your forefathers, the LORD brought you out by a mighty hand, and redeemed you from the house of slavery, from the hand of Pharaoh king of Egypt (Deut. 7:6-8; NASB).

⁷ Thomas Williamson, “Dispensationalism and Racism,” *Media Monitors Network* 4 June 2001, <<http://www.mediamonitors.net/williamson3.html>> (accessed 27 September 2006). At the time of this writing, Williamson serves as the Assistant Pastor at Metropolitan Baptist Tabernacle in Melrose Park, Illinois. The church is associated with the Baptist Missionary Association of American which split off from the landmark American Baptist Association in 1950.

⁸ Throughout this paper I will make no distinction between the terms *Jews*, *Hebrews*, or *Israelites*.

⁹ It is probably worth noting that the King James Version (and NKJV) translates the words which NASB gives as “out of all the peoples” as “above all peoples.” This is an unfortunate translation which could be read to indicate the divine establishment of superiority for Israel above all other nations.

Do not say in your heart when the LORD your God has driven them out before you, ‘Because of my righteousness the LORD has brought me in to possess this land,’ but it is because of the wickedness of these nations that the LORD is dispossessing them before you. It is not your righteousness or for the uprightness of your heart that you are going to possess their land, but it is because of the wickedness of these nations that the LORD your God is driving them out before you, in order to confirm the oath which the LORD swore to you fathers, to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Know, then, it is not because of your righteousness that the LORD your God is giving you this good land to possess, for you are a stubborn people (Deut. 9:4-6; NASB).

These passages clearly show that God’s attitude toward the Israelites was not that they were a cut above the other people groups they were displacing following the exodus from Egypt. God’s faithfulness to his covenant pledge to Abraham is highlighted as well as the necessary judgment in light of the wickedness of the other nations. Dispensationalists have consistently, on my reading, been faithful in pointing out these details.¹⁰

The charge of racism cited above also lends itself to the incitement of unjustified fear on the part of those who are anti-Zionists. Recall that the writer said that dispensationalists teach that the superior Jewish people are the ones “who are destined to take over Palestine, then the entire Middle East and finally the world.” The brevity of the remark, without any context of Messiah’s coming or without the happy kingdom sharing of all nations or people groups as taught in Scripture and by dispensationalists (Dan. 7:13-14), misses the mark horribly. It reads as if dispensationalists along with other Zionists are engaging in a kind of Israeli imperialism. This, of course, is exactly how modern-day Islamic terrorists seek to portray the nation of Israel. The modern nation of Israel, far from being established in 1948 out of the horror of the Holocaust of World War II and in keeping with its ancient homeland boundaries, is considered an oppressive occupier of territory that belongs to someone else, i.e., the Palestinians.

American Zionists, including dispensationalists, are seen as supporting the imperial bent of the founding of Israel and its continued possession of its land and nationhood. Since hostile statements against the nation of Israel are so numerous, it is hard to choose a starting place for discussion. Perhaps it is best to begin with the well-known United Nations General Assembly Resolution 3379 (November 10, 1975) which links South African racism and Zionism while using the expression “unholy alliance.” It further quotes from an earlier Mexican declaration: “international cooperation and peace require the achievement of national liberation and independence, the elimination of colonialism and neo-colonialism, foreign occupation, Zionism, apartheid and racial discrimination in all its forms...”¹¹ Clearly, the United Nations sentiment

¹⁰ John Nelson Darby noted, “Nor did God set His love upon them [Israel] on account of their own importance, but because of the election and love of God” (*Synopsis of the Books of the Bible* [Reprint ed.: Addison, IL: Bible Truth Publishers, 1979], 1:291). I reviewed Hal Lindsey’s *The Late Great Planet Earth* and found no hint of “superiority” language relative to the Jews and Israel. To my knowledge there is no note in the *Scofield Reference Bible* that clearly teaches the superiority of the Jews over all other peoples. Finally, Arnold Fruchtenbaum, a typical present-day dispensationalist, speaks clearly of God’s election of the nation of Israel to carry out His purposes without tying it to any superiority theme relative to the Jews (*Israelology: The Missing Link in Systematic Theology* [Revised ed., Tustin, CA: Ariel Ministries, 1992], 567-70).

¹¹ *Jewish Virtual Library*, <<http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/UN/unga3379.html>> (accessed 6 October 2006).

officially expressed in an approved resolution is that Zionism, which primarily consists of Israel's right to its land, is racism. The Palestinian Rabee' Sahyoun describes Zionism with the harshest of terms. Israel should not be described in a positive way due to its alleged democracy because to "do so is to miss the normal atrocities that occur in Israel daily, the millions who are under curfew and blockade, starving and brutalized, in the Middle East's only colonized state. To do so is to feign the reality of Zionism, a racist and irredeemable movement, that survived the twentieth centuries' other genocidal and seemingly passing revolutions such as Bolshevism, Nazism, and Apartheid."¹²

Within such a mindset it is not difficult to see President Bush and current United States foreign policy as advancing a neo-colonialist agenda that marginalizes the Palestinians as a people. Added to this is the President's refusal, two weeks before 9-11, to send U. S. representatives to a U. N. conference on racism if the conference insisted on calling Zionism a form of racism.¹³ Since dispensationalism has more often than not supported the nation of Israel, it is easy to see the connection between the influential evangelical world and Bush administration policies as leading to racist imperialism and oppression if one accepts the premise of a pre-1948 Palestinian homeland of some sort.

In response, one must point out that belief that Zionism is racism can not be rationally maintained on such a shaky historical foundation. In the 1800s the land of Palestine was a largely uninhabited and deteriorating region.¹⁴ Even Arabic leaders in those days welcomed the Jews to the land, believing them able to build it up and bring life to the region.¹⁵ Thus, in the beginning the Jewish return to the land was not viewed as anti-Arab. Furthermore, if Zionism is a form of racism, how can one understand the fact that there are one million Muslim and Christian Arabs as well as other ethnic groups who live in Israel (some even holding seats in the Knesset and all having voting rights)?¹⁶ In addition, Israelis can point to the great financial and time expense to which they have gone to bring Ethiopian (black) Jews into the country.¹⁷ On the other side, the absence of Jews from Arab nations is telling: "By contrast, the Arab states define citizenship strictly by native parentage. It is almost impossible to become a naturalized citizen in many Arab states... Jordan, on the other hand, instituted its own 'law of return' in 1954, according citizenship to all former residents in Palestine, except for Jews."¹⁸ In light of the many statements down through the years coming out of the Arab and Persian lands, which call for the

¹² Rabee' Sahyoun, "Why Zionism is Racism," *Albalagh*, <http://www.albalagh.net/current_affairs/zionism_racism.shtml> (accessed 6 October 2006).

¹³ Office of International Information Programs, U.S. Department of State, "Bush Says U. N. Conference on Racism Must Not Target Israel," 24 August 2001, <<http://www.usembassy-israel.org.il/publish/peace/archives/2001/august/0824a.html>> (accessed 6 October 2006). This posting comes largely from a Bush news conference on August 24, 2001.

¹⁴ Mitchell G. Bard, *Myth and Facts: A Guide to the Arab-Israeli Conflict* (Chevy Chase, MD: American-Israeli Cooperative Enterprise, 2001), 29-30.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 30.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 230.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 31.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

extermination of the Jews and eradication of the state of Israel, the dispensationalist must be forgiven for wondering out loud if the racism is not on the other side.

Dispensational Theology and National Ethics

Related to the specific issue of racism and oppression is the larger question of God's dealings with nations generally. Some critics of dispensationalism have posited a theological deficiency as the basis for mistreatment of the Arabs in the Arab-Israeli conflict. These critics would argue that dispensationalism with its influence on American policy makers leads, probably unintentionally, to a diminishing of attention for the Arabs which, in turn, causes mistreatment at various levels.

The actual vehicle for alleged mistreatment of Arabs by dispensationalism is its undue and uncaring influence on the United States government. For example, David Brog, a Jewish friend of Christian Zionists (mostly dispensationalists), describes one actual scenario that no doubt bothers those who are not dispensationalists:

Israel has sent troops into the West Bank to seek and destroy terrorist cells responsible for a wave of suicide bombings that have killed hundreds of Israeli civilians. While sympathetic to Israel's need to fight terrorism, President George W. Bush wants to stop Israel from conducting too long and deep a raid. A few days after the incursion begins, Bush starts pressuring Israel to pull its soldiers out of the West Bank.

This time, protest comes not only from the Jewish community but also from the evangelical Christian community. The White House is flooded with hundreds of thousands of e-mails and phone calls from the heartland in support of Israel. Evangelical Christians organize a nationwide day of prayer for Israel with the participation of an estimated sixteen thousand churches and five million parishioners. The Christian Coalition holds a large rally in Washington to demonstrate its solidarity with Israel.

While George W. Bush received no more Jewish support than did his father, evangelical Christians formed the core of his political base. This time, the administration could not afford to ignore the protests. And this time, due to his own evangelical leanings, President Bush was, by all accounts, predisposed to listen. When Israel kept its tanks in the West Bank for many months thereafter, the U. S. administration was silent.¹⁹

Consequently, the beliefs of dispensationalism concerning Israel dominate the evangelical conversation with the current administration so as to affect the outcome of major geo-political decisions in the Middle Eastern conflict.

One writer from a nondispensational perspective summarizes well a negative response: "Perhaps the most glaring weakness in the Christian Zionist program is its failure to relate to or defend Palestinian Christians, who are fleeing their homeland in record numbers not due to Islamic extremism, but because of Israel's brutal occupation policies, including economic closures, theft of land and settlement construction, and military aggression."²⁰ Such a statement

¹⁹ David Brog, *Standing with Israel: Why Christians Support the Jewish State* (Lake Mary, FL: FrontLine, 2006), 133-34. Brog is a lawyer who worked on the staff of Senator Arlen Specter of Pennsylvania.

gives an indictment of dispensationalists and other Christian Zionists on the basis of ethics. In the minds of these interpreters of the Middle Eastern situation, Zionists are turning a blind eye to the needs of others in violation of Scripture just like the priest and Levite in the Good Samaritan story (Luke 10:30-37). In light of this particular passage, one critic argues that dispensationalism has an unbiblical “bias in favor of Israelis above Palestinians” which is not in harmony with the teaching of Jesus. Therefore, the conclusion is drawn that dispensationalism is doctrinally “anti-Christ.”²¹ Another author words the ethical challenge in a slightly different direction, when he skeptically wonders when dispensationalists will finally be obedient to Christ’s exhortation to be peacemakers instead of holding to their pro-Israel posture.²²

A dispensational reaction to such a viewpoint begins by questioning the claims of brutality and military aggression by the Israeli military. Without arguing for the perfection of the nation of Israel and its large military machine, it is quite easy to show that the reverse is generally true. One can ask a few simple questions to highlight the quandary for those who favor the Arab side of the debate. When did Israel ever attack another nation without provocation? In 1948 on the day after the announcement of its statehood, was not Israel attacked by Egypt, Syria, Jordan, Iraq, Saudi Arabia, and Lebanon?²³ The only provocation from Israel’s side was its existence. In the 1956 Suez War, did not Egypt blockade the Straits of Tiran? Even in the 1967 Six-Day War when Israel made a pre-emptive strike against Egypt, Egypt had massed troops on the border and had again blockaded the Straits of Tiran, Israel’s major outlet for shipping—an act that could be construed as an act of war. Did not Egypt and Syria invade Israel in 1973 on the high, holy day of Yom Kippur? If Arab nations were attacked in surprise on any day of Ramadan, what would be the outcry? In 1982, was not Israel’s incursion into Lebanon caused by the heavy use of katusha rockets coming from the PLO located in safe havens in southern Lebanon? Did we not recently witness a similar event this year when Israel entered Lebanon because of rocket attacks from Hezbollah? Let’s make sure to get the details right. Has Israel ever declared its desire to exterminate Arabs or eliminate any particular Arab nation from the face of the earth? No, it is quite the other way. Have we ever had to worry about Jews hijacking airliners for political reasons? Who was it that murdered Olympic athletes in Munich in 1972? Has any Arab nation had to rescue its people as Israel was forced to do at Entebbe in 1976? One must confess a certain amount of consternation when confronting those who want dispensationalists to join Israelis as sweet peacemakers when it is the other side that has consistently demonstrated a lack of desire for peace apart from the annihilation of national Israel. In light of such a litany of facts, it is quite bizarre for faculty representatives from a significant evangelical school to charge that the bad theology of dispensationalism “is attributing to secular

²⁰ Donald E. Wagner, “Short Fuse to Apocalypse?” *Sojourners Magazine* (July/August 2003), <http://www.findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_qa4010/is_200307/ai_n9284400/print > (accessed 9 September 2006).

²¹ Steve Wohlberg, “Is Dispensationalism ‘Antichrist,’” *White Horse Media*, <<http://whitehorsemedia.com/articles/artDetails.cfm?artID=43>> (accessed 11 October 2006).

²² Timothy P. Weber, *On the Road to Armageddon: How Evangelicals Became Israel’s Best Friend* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2004), 267.

²³ For a good summary of the Arab-Israeli conflict from 1948 to 1982, see Chaim Herzog, *The Arab-Israeli Wars: War and Peace in the Middle East from the War of Independence through Lebanon* (New York: Vintage Books, 1984).

Israel a divine mandate to conquer and hold Palestine, with the consequence that the Palestinian people are marginalized and regarded as virtual ‘Canaanites.’”²⁴

The same approach can also be held relative to economic and humane treatment of Palestinian Arabs. It is not the Israelis who are on the short end of the evaluation. Arab stinginess with respect to Palestinian refugees is a well-known fact. Little effort has been put forward by Arab and other Moslem nations to assist them financially, when oil revenues make such an undertaking easy to do if only there were the will to do so.²⁵ In fact, the maintaining of a Palestinian refugee problem serves as a political necessity for Israel’s enemies as they attempt to win the propaganda war in international discourse. Millions of Palestinians remain in refugee camps while the Arab nations refuse to assimilate them for political reasons.²⁶

Now what can be made of such discussions? First, one must point out that the debate over the ethical treatment of Arabs in Palestine by Israelis supported by the United States, which in turn is heavily influenced by pro-Israel dispensational theology, involves primarily an interpretation of *history* and not theology. For example, differences as those discussed above do not involve one’s interpretation of the story of the Good Samaritan. Dispensationalists heartily concur with Jesus’ given teaching and believe it to be universally applicable to Arabs in the Middle East as well as Jews in Israel. What divides dispensationalists from their critics at this juncture is an analysis of the facts on the ground, so to speak. How does one interpret the history of the rise of modern Zionism and the happenings in the Middle East leading up to the present time? Enough details have been cited above to suggest why dispensationalists enjoy the upper hand.

Second, the issue that has emerged and is alluded to in the critiques of dispensationalism’s powerful influence in Middle Eastern political affairs is that pro-Israel theology leads dispensationalists to overlook treatment of the other side. In other words, the theological bent serves as a presuppositional grid which does not allow dispensationalists to consider the misdeeds of Israel or have a fair and balanced treatment of issues in the region. To be sure, the dispensationalist must be true to the facts of history, accurate in understanding current events, and exact in his exegesis of Scripture. This means that no genuine Israeli oppression of the Arabs can be justified and must be opposed even by dispensational Christian Zionists. The dispensationalist would also hasten to say that the correct interpretation of alleged Israeli oppression is not to be determined by any anti-Israeli American press coverage on CNN or by the imaginations found at Al Jazeera. An honest attempt must be made toward full objectivity.

In addition to these basic thoughts, the dispensationalist needs to remind his critics that they too must be equally leery of a potential bias on their part. For example, the position of preterism which, among other theological positions, has no future for national Israel, might be prone to lead to a presuppositional grid leaning unfairly toward the Arabs and against Israel. In fact, the existence of Israel in the land since 1948 could potentially turn out to be the precursor to

²⁴ “An Open Letter to Evangelicals and Other Interested Parties: The People of God, the Land of Israel, and the Impartiality of the Gospel,” *Knox Seminary* (2002), <<http://www.knoxseminary.org/Prospective/Faculty/WittenbergDoor>> (accessed 21 September 2006).

²⁵ Mitchell G. Bard, *Myth and Facts: A Guide to the Arab-Israeli Conflict* (Chevy Chase, MD: American-Israeli Cooperative Enterprise, 2001), 182-85.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 185-87.

God's final plan for that nation in the judgment of the tribulation period followed by its national and spiritual restoration to kingdom glory at the return of Christ. This potential alone has kept some (perhaps many) evangelicals from taking seriously the preterist proposal that most or all prophecies relative to the Second Coming have already been fulfilled. Such a circumstance could provide a strong motive for holding a pro-Arab or an anti-Israel position. After all, the preterist's ability to defend his views within the evangelical community would probably be enhanced if Israel was simply not in the land. This example shows that bias on the other side is equally plausible. Both sides need to examine their presuppositions and let the Bible arbitrate final decisions, not current events or status. Dispensationalists no doubt take great satisfaction in knowing that the earliest dispensationalists in modern times taught the same interpretation of the Bible without Israel being in the land. In the end, there will probably be no fruitful dialog in the debate between dispensationalists and their critics if the avenue of discussion is damage caused by presuppositions.

Dispensationalism, War-Mongering, and Self-Fulfilling Prophecy

There is no question that some dispensationalists have acted in ways attempting to help prophecy along. For example, William E. Blackstone (1841-1935), who founded the Chicago Hebrew Mission in 1887, wrote a stirring summary of Bible prophecy entitled *Jesus is Coming* (1878), a fairly accurate work that is still in print. In addition to social and evangelistic outreach to Jews, he had a heart to see the Jews return to their homeland in Palestine. This was not merely a theological wish on his part nor did he leave it up to the rest of history to bring about. Instead, Blackstone, whom Brog calls the "Father of American Zionism," made specific efforts to bring about the national homeland of the Jews.²⁷ Concerned about the horrible plight of Russian Jews, Blackstone organized a petition with the signature of 413 prominent Americans, which was sent with a letter to President Benjamin Harrison in 1891.²⁸ The petition, which later came to be called the Blackstone Memorial, called for the support of the American government for the return of the Jews to their own nation, which had been taken from them by the Romans in 70 A.D. Although action was not taken by President Harrison, the petition was revived and presented to President Woodrow Wilson on June 30, 1917. In October of that year, Wilson sent word to the British government that he was sympathetic with the idea of a homeland for Israel. The next month the British government authorized the idea of statehood for the Jews in Palestine in the famous Balfour Declaration. What makes the statement viable at that time is that the British were soon expected to capture Jerusalem from the Ottomans, which they did in December 1917.

All in all, Blackstone's desire to help oppressed Russian Jews, something that foreshadowed the world's response to the Holocaust after World War II, was a noble one. If his desire to help them also coincided with his belief in Bible prophecy about the end-times, so much the better. However, in more recent times, the charge has been leveled at dispensationalism that portrays such involvement as an evil in its own right. For example, David Carlson, one detractor, regrets the notion that the book of Revelation is taken in a literal fashion

²⁷ Brog, *Standing with Israel*, 97.

²⁸ The activities of Blackstone on behalf of Zionism have been well covered by both pro-Zionists and critics. See Brog, *Standing with Israel*, 98-118 and Weber, *On the Road to Armageddon*, 102-07.

and that Bible prophecy is taken to support present-day Israel. Notice the strong wording: “In this view, not only are Palestinians of no value, but the sole reason for Jews to return to Israel is to hasten the slaughter that triggers the return of Christ.”²⁹ This disturbing rant against dispensationalists sees them as anti-Arab and anti-Israeli simultaneously. The goal in mind for dispensationalists is the Second Coming of Christ. They desire to see, in Carlson’s view, the awful tribulation period with its wars and judgments killing millions upon millions of people. Supporting Israel speeds this process up so we can get to the Second Coming. In this scheme dispensationalists are presented as not caring about any individuals along the way. No wonder that the same author elsewhere describes dispensationalism as the view where “Israeli displacement of Palestinian villages...is celebrated as a necessary part of God’s plan.”³⁰ Furthermore, Carlson notes, “An upside-down Christianity emerges with premillennial dispensationalism. It creates a skewed view of the Christian faith that welcomes war and disaster, while dismissing peace efforts in the Middle East and elsewhere—all in the name of Christ.”³¹ One can easily visualize such critics correlating the so-called dark side of dispensationalism here with the “cowboy diplomacy” of President Bush and his relatively harder line toward the Arabs, the War on Terror, and the war in Iraq.

On the face of it, such a harsh analysis comes across as mere emotionalism with nothing that is logically compelling. First of all, is it really fair to say that dispensationalists *welcome* war? Even if one assumes the most die-hard dispensationalist possible, to say that one is *expecting* war is not the same thing as affirming that one *wants* war. There is no glee or emotional satisfaction that dispensationalists get out of knowing that war is on the horizon in light of the Bible’s predictions. The Bible has predicted many things, some of which have been fulfilled in the past, which were not positive experiences. For example, the text of the Bible predicts the death of Ahab and Jezebel in grizzly detail (1 Kings 21:17-24), the political intrigues and murders during the Greek period (Dan. 11:3-35), and war during the reign of David (2 Sam. 12:10ff). There are countless examples of these kinds throughout the pages of the Bible. To affirm the truth of the Bible in its predictions of war with past or future fulfillment does not turn the interpreter into a war-monger. Perhaps some of the reluctance on the part of many dispensationalists to support various peace initiatives in the Arab-Israeli conflict is founded on the track record of the Arabs which has been described earlier. At this point in history, the anti-Zionist actions of many Arabs speak louder than any peace treaty proposals. The recycling of peace proposals that are then broken may be a better explanation for the dispensational reluctance, especially when the stated goal of so many Arabs is the elimination of the nation of Israel. If all of the Arab peoples would live in peaceful harmony with Israel at this present moment in history, dispensationalists would rise up and rejoice.

Secondly, the claim that dispensationalists want to help prophecy along by influencing American policy to lead to war and conflict in the Middle East falls to the ground due to a lack of detailed information about what the dispensational position actually entails. Dispensationalists believe in a pre-tribulational rapture of the Church. True Church-Age believers will be taken to

²⁹ David Carlson, “‘Left Behind’ and the Corruption of Biblical Interpretation,” *OrthodoxyToday.org* (2003), <<http://www.orthodoxytoday.org/articles/CarlsonPremillennial.php>> (accessed 11 October 2006). Carlson is Professor of Religious Studies at Franklin College, Franklin, Indiana. According to this posted article he is also Greek Orthodox.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ *Ibid.*

be with the Lord before the dreadful day of the Lord (tribulation period of seven years) happens on the earth. As individuals, Christians will have no direct involvement or personal stake in what goes on during that time since they will not be here. Moreover, war is not a necessary precondition for the rapture of the Church to take place. A critic could respond by noting that a speeding up of the events that could lead to the tribulation will of necessity move the possibility of the rapture closer to our own time. In reply, it must be noted that the only biblical prerequisites for the tribulation to take place are the existence of Israel in the land and the rise of Antichrist—these two parties sign a *peace* treaty that begins the seven-year tribulation (Dan. 9:27). In light of these prophetic realities and the love for Israel that dispensationalists possess for God's chosen people, dispensationalists should be viewed as seeking the security of Israel and not happily pursuing war.

One final comment must be made in this regard. The book of Revelation, whose literal interpretation Carlson disdained in the quote above, teaches clearly that God's ways are true and just (Rev. 19:2). These ways, on any interpretive scheme of the book, include judgment upon people for sin. Therefore, to impugn the details of the book taken at face value may also, in the end, impugn the character of God. Most dispensationalists have a healthy regard for God's bigger role in all of this, including those like William Blackstone. It is God's prerogative to bring the rapture, tribulation, Second Coming of Christ to earth, and the kingdom in His own timing and His own way in keeping with His revealed Word. Dispensationalists understand that there is a bigger player on the field who gets to bat more often.

Conclusion

Moslems have no doubt read the book of Genesis, taking special notice of the land boundaries promised to Abraham and his children: "To your descendents I have given this land, from the river of Egypt as far as the great river, the river Euphrates" (Gen. 15:18; NASB). Most dispensationalists understand this text in harmony with the Moslem reading—the boundaries are from the Nile River in Egypt to the Euphrates in modern day Iraq. Both dispensationalists and Moslems have noticed that the land boundaries have never been realized for Israel. Mitchell Bard notes, "In Iran, a map purporting to show Israel's 'dream' boundaries – an empire including Saudi Arabia, Iraq, Kuwait, and parts of Turkey and Iran – was included in a 1985 reprint of the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, the notorious Czarist forgery."³² Similarly, there is a myth commonly believed in the Islamic world that a large map hanging in the Israeli parliament documents the Israeli hunger to obtain the entire empire indicated by the land boundaries.³³ This myth is maintained tenaciously even though there is not one documented soul, including a Moslem, who has seen the map. To counter the claim that Israel is clandestinely planning the conquest of those lands through war one only has to look once again at the history of modern Israel. When it has been attacked, it has put down its enemies and generally given back the land obtained, some of it more than once (Sinai). Of course, there is the question of the West Bank, the disputed "occupied" territory. However, even on the wildest imagination, one can not turn Israel's reluctance to give it up into a campaign to march to the Euphrates. Dispensationalists know that Messiah will one day give the entire land promised to Abraham to Israel at the

³² Bard, *Myths and Facts*, 113.

³³ *Ibid.*

beginning of His coming kingdom. Therefore, there is no need to posit some theological need to pursue conquest in the present hour. Current dispensationalists, no doubt in harmony with President Bush, only wish for the Arabs and other Moslems to leave Israel alone.³⁴

³⁴ One related subject that is beyond the scope of this paper is the theological issue of the Jewish possession of the land while in unbelief from a Christian point of view. I have responded to this question to some degree in Mike Stallard, "A Dispensational Response to the Knox Seminary Open Letter to Evangelicals," *The Journal of Ministry and Theology* 7 (Fall 2003): 5-41. See also John Piper, "Land Divine?" *World Magazine* (May 11, 2002). A corollary of this line of thought would be the question, from a dispensational point of view, of whether Israel can be removed from the land in the course of present human affairs with the dispensational theological perspective still intact. My answer is "yes" in terms of biblical reasoning, but the dispensational tradition needs to wrestle with this question a bit more than it normally does.