

Response to D. Brent Sandy's Paper:  
“*Plowshares and Pruning Hooks* and the Hermeneutics of Dispensationalism”

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I am privileged here today to respond to Brent Sandy's update on his earlier work *Plowshares and Pruning Hooks*. I have used his book as one of the textbooks in a doctrinal seminar I have taught over the last several years. My purpose in using it was to inform students, who were mostly traditional dispensationalists, of one particular way that hermeneutics and theological method were being discussed relative to prophetic literature in the Bible. So I have had some exposure to his work before this ETS discussion.<sup>1</sup> At the outset I want to state my general perspective. I am a traditional dispensationalist who acknowledges the need for doctrinal development as we grow in the Lord, but who is also not ashamed of the older Ryrie synthesis for the essence of dispensationalism.<sup>2</sup> The kind of consistent literal interpretation he envisioned, even for prophecy, is consistent with the ICBI statement on hermeneutics which sanctions literal interpretation understood as grammatical-historical interpretation and which takes into account all literary devices.<sup>3</sup> I also must confess that I do not hold the view that progress in the field of biblical studies, even evangelical biblical studies, is inevitable. So I tend to question new things, but hopefully not with an overly critical spirit. My response below is primarily my own reflections based upon Brent's paper. As such I have decided to follow his outline section by section most of the way through.

### Lenses of Interpretation

I want to begin my analysis with Brent's proposed eight lenses for interpretation. A general word is in order before specific responses are made. Whenever a list of this kind is proposed for reading biblical prophecy, we must be careful not to suggest that such a list provides universal hermeneutical rules that govern the reading of *every* prophecy. The temptation sometimes emerges to treat these as patterns that should be found everywhere in prophetic texts in much the same way that we treat elements of lament psalms. I think prophetic literature is much more elastic than lament psalms so we should resist the urge to oversimplify. In addition, I personally prefer that we not speak of these as hermeneutical rules at all. Instead, many of the things that Brent mentions are simply observations of what we find in many prophetic texts. These observations vary considerably from passage to passage. However, it is true that the interpreter should be alert to the fact that there is a greater chance of observing such elements within prophetic texts.

#### *Lens Two*

I will not deal with the first lens Brett proposes since I am in substantial agreement with it. In each of the other seven lenses a few of Brent's statements caught my attention and I will highlight those particular points. The *second lens* is the observation that “the life-blood of prophecy is an emotional God, eager to bless, but willing to judge.” On the face of it, I have no problem with this notion. The many examples that Brent brings forward show without question that often in prophetic texts God is presented as mourning over the waywardness of His children. Beyond this, the language that God uses to express His mourning is powerfully emotional and sometimes filled with an anger

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<sup>1</sup> Throughout my presentation I will refer to Brent informally by his first name.

<sup>2</sup> Charles Ryrie, *Dispensationalism* (Chicago: Moody, 1995), 38-41.

<sup>3</sup> See Earl D. Radmacher and Robert D. Preus, *Hermeneutics, Inerrancy, and the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Academic Books, 1984), 884-85.

famously expressed by such things as a jilted lover. In the general sweep of these things I have no problem.

However, there is a single statement that I am not sure tells enough of the whole story. It seems to have some importance. Brent makes the following assertion: “Deuteronomy 28 records language almost too gruesome to appear in the Bible, concluding with the possibility of cancelling the covenant.” He then invokes verse 68 in defense of that notion. A couple of observations are in order. First, this carries with it the force of a prediction, something that Brent downplays later. This is especially true when the context of the following chapters is considered. I do not want to use the idea of prediction here to remove the primary focus of blessing and cursing. Nonetheless, God is giving rather straight-forward predictions of what will happen based upon the behavior of the Israelites, predictions that come true based upon later revelation and the history of the nation. Although these predictions do not necessarily entail discussion of an eschaton, they are predictions nonetheless.

Second, there is a larger theme being invoked that the curses, including this one, raises. The following chapters show that there is a predictive certainty that Israel will one day “play the harlot” and be removed from the land (see Deut. 29:21-29; 31:16-22). Yet there is in the section the anticipation that Israel would one day obey and be brought back into the land (Deut. 30:1-8). The language is strong and reminds one of the later prophecies of the new covenant, even if such is not in view. In summary, there appears to be in the text of Deuteronomy 28-32 a tension between the conditionality of the Mosaic Covenant and Abrahamic promise. It would not be surprising to hear an Israelite ask upon hearing the curses, “What about the promises to Abraham?” The anticipation within the context shows that, although an individual or even the nation as a whole could forfeit the blessings under the Law for themselves, they did not automatically do so for all coming generations. Thus, the Abrahamic Covenant was not made null and void.

### *Lens Three*

***Lens number three*** for Brent is the following: “the function of prophetic ministry can be summarized in two words, *convicting* and *energizing*.” Following Westermann, he emphasizes here the two main illocutionary functions of prophetic texts. I will give my thoughts about this focus on function when I discuss his sixth lens on illocution. For now, I want to address a minor point when Brent suggests that oracles of judgment are a form of judicial procedure against violators of the covenant. This, of course, works with judgment statements against Israel, but it is not at all clear that Babylon in Isaiah 14 and the pagan nations in Amos 1-2 are somehow violating a covenant. Therefore, it might be better to avoid covenantal language when generally describing the essence of oracles of judgment in the prophets.

### *Lens Four*

Of far more importance is Brent’s ***fourth lens***: “Inherent in the language of blessing and judgment is conditionality.” He adds that “it (the conditionality) surfaces throughout the language of the covenant.” There is sometimes an imprecision to how Brent is using the word *covenant*. At times I could use some clarification. I am assuming here that he means primarily the Mosaic Covenant even though he quickly moves to similar expressions of the Abrahamic and Davidic Covenants. I am quite happy to see that Brent acknowledges unconditional elements in the Abrahamic Covenant. While there are some syntax questions to the example of Genesis 17:1-2, there are certainly some conditions mentioned without question in Genesis 17:9-12. Traditional dispensationalists have generally taken the Abrahamic, Davidic, and New Covenants as unconditional plans and promises, not conditioned upon the overall obedience of the nation. The Mosaic Covenant has been viewed as conditional.

Then, how are such conditional elements as those that Brent mentions and that are clearly in the texts of the so-called unconditional covenants to be handled?

Traditional dispensationalists have handled these rather deftly I think by understanding that the overall covenant plan or promise is unconditional. That is, it can not be made void. At the same time, individuals under the covenant within the nation can, through personal disobedience, forfeit their right to experience the blessings of the Abrahamic and Davidic Covenants and therefore invite judgment into their lives.<sup>4</sup> I think many progressive dispensationalists are in agreement on this point. Craig Blaising comments:

Abraham's obedience to God's commandments does function as *the means* by which he experiences God's blessing on a day to day basis. These commandments function as *conditions* for Abraham's *historical experience* of divine blessing, for as he obeys God, God blesses him more and more. But these obligations do not condition the fundamental intention to bless Abraham. They condition the *how* and *why* of the blessing.

This is perhaps seen best in the Genesis 18:18-19 passage where in the strongest possible language, the Lord declares that "Abraham will surely become a great and mighty nation, and in him all the nations of the earth will be blessed." And then he adds, "For I have chosen him, in order that he may command his children and his household after him to keep the way of the Lord by doing righteousness and justice; in order that the Lord may bring upon Abraham what He has spoken about him."

If the Abrahamic covenant was a bilateral covenant, verse 18 could not be stated in this factual way.<sup>5</sup>

Thus, the best way to take account of the conditional elements within the Abrahamic Covenant is to see them as affecting those who sin but not affecting the covenant plan as a whole.

Can the same be said of the Davidic Covenant? Brent mentions the "if-then" theme of Psalm 89:27-37 and 132:12. These particular conditionality elements must be framed correctly. Psalm 89:33-37 is not about the conditional elements themselves. These words are also not about the benefits of obedience. They are about God's actions regardless of the spiritual disposition of the sons of David. After asserting the possibility that the sons of David would forsake Him, God promises and predicts in certain and powerful words: "But I will not break off My lovingkindness from him [David], Nor deal falsely in My faithfulness. My Covenant I will not violate, Nor will I alter the utterance of My lips. Once I have sworn by My holiness: I will not lie to David. His descendants shall endure forever, And his throne as the sun before Me. It shall be established forever like the moon, And the witness in the sky is faithful." There is no hyperbole in the beginning of this passage. These are direct statements from God that his covenant promises will not be annulled by the disobedience of any Davidic king. God uses the strongest language in doing so. He invokes His own holiness as the basis of oath and considers Himself a liar if His promise to David fails even in light of the disobedience of the Davidic sons. Therefore, the identical framework is in place for this unconditional covenant as for the promises to Abraham. It is this framework which forms one of the foundations for dispensational premillennialism itself and is why many of us hold this view.

Now, let's get back to Brent's concern—one must not remove the conditionality elements from the language of blessing and judgment. To be sure there are two extremes to avoid. On one hand, we

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<sup>4</sup> I will reserve for another time my thoughts about the New Covenant's permanent posture relative to Israel in the eschaton and the fact that at some point (eternal state) there are no conditionality elements within it. This may also be true of the millennium but I must think on this some more.

<sup>5</sup> Craig Blaising and Darrell Bock, *Progressive Dispensationalism* (Wheaton: Bridgepoint, 1993), 133-34.

must not commit the error of covenant theology by using these conditional elements within prophecies under Abrahamic and Davidic promise to suggest that the entire extent of the promises are conditional and the covenant plans as wholes can be annulled. This moves us toward some form of replacement theology. On the other hand, and I think this is Brent's major concern although he does not directly voice it, dispensationalists can so focus on the unconditionality of the covenants that we do not do justice to the conditional elements within the passages. This may be a fair assessment for some traditionalists, especially in popular appeal, but many traditionalists have given due attention to the conditional elements.<sup>6</sup>

Finally, Brent follows Kaiser in asserting that most prophecies appear to be implicitly conditional. This is a discussion that has invaded our thoughts in recent days largely, in my opinion, through the door of open theism and the need of its self-defense in prophetic passages. That has forced us to reexamine many passages and try to be honest with what the text is telling us. I am not convinced yet that the majority of prophecies in the prophets are implicitly conditional. I would certainly demand some textual markers to help me ascertain this and not be left to a subjective opinion without foundation. Even if the claim is exegetically true, I think the exegetical and theological structure I have defended above would still be in place. In the end, I am skeptical about the claim but have not studied this enough to advance the discussion much at this point in my studies.

### *Lens Five*

Brent's fifth lens is that "the majority of prophecy is poetry and must be interpreted accordingly." I will not dispute the claim. This is an observation that seems to be on the mark in general terms although I have not mathematically verified the statement! Brent's Old Testament illustrations are excellent examples of the need for interpreters to read poetry correctly. It is also true that figurative elements factor significantly into prose passages as well. The observation of Brent's fifth lens is to urge us not to quickly scamper through prophecy in a literalistic fashion in violation of its genre. To be sure, no one I know has been extremely off the mark on this point. Has anyone ever taken the sword in Jesus' mouth (Rev. 19:15) at the Second Coming in a literalistic way? If they have, I have never encountered them. As someone who was raised in the Deep South of the United States, I know quite well that figurative language is part of life and literature! The Hebrews were no different. So, Brent's observation on the face of it must be accepted and taken into account as we read prophecy as well as other genres in Scripture.

However, let me make some other observations that I hope will bring some exactness to the discussion. I think the tenor of statements scattered throughout Brent's presentation is the recognition that grammatical-historical understanding of a text (sometimes called literal hermeneutics) is a broad enough category to encompass all kinds of literary devices. This is a different question (and I think Brent would agree) than whether a phrase or a section is poetic in nature or a figure of speech. I often ask my students how they know that a particular section of the Bible is a certain genre. Do they read a Bible handbook that tells them and another book that gives them the rules to read that genre? The fact of the matter is that grammatical-historical reading takes place before one recognizes the genre. In other words, genre is discovered in the text. This discovery allows the interpreter to know the lay of the ground so to speak. If he sees the elements of poetry (e.g., figures of speech and parallelism), he will take pains to read carefully the whole section with those things in mind, being careful not to see

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<sup>6</sup> For example, Arno C. Gaebelein, in spite of wild typology at times in historical narrative, was often cautiously judicious in prophetic passages, taking great pains to discuss the consequences of disobedience to the promises and plans of God. I discuss such understandings in my book *The Early Twentieth-Century Dispensationalism of Arno C. Gaebelein* (Lewiston: Mellen, 2002).

things that are not there. Thus, using the poetic understanding of a text is a second-order observation that comes after the first-order grammatical-historical reading.

Another comment I want to make is that Brent, in discussing this lens for interpretation, uses language that may be prone to misunderstanding. My students who have reviewed *Plowshares and Pruning Hooks* uniformly assess Brent's work as being too mystical, subjective, and given over to postmodern uncertainty. There are several ways that Brent's discussion here may reinforce such notions. He notes that the creative imagination of the prophet is not about giving precise detail. It is "not about information transfer but transformation." While I understand what Brent is trying to say, there may be an either/or here that would better be served by a both/and. While the big idea of a section of poetry may be the point, there is still cognitive information that is conveyed that is the vehicle by which the transformation is attained.

Further, Brent says that reading biblical poetry "means looking through the words not at the words." I am reminded of his exhortation in *Plowshares and Pruning Hooks* to listen to prophecy with my heart and not just my head (p. 198). I must confess that I am not quite sure how to do that. It is the content of the words that conveys what my mind must use to tell my whole being how to respond. I know the power of the language by understanding the words in context. He goes on to say that "to discover the authorial intent we must probe the author's expressions in order to distinguish between intended truths and imaginative ways of describing them." I am not sure that we should distinguish anything. Intended truths are given *by means of* imaginative ways of describing them. Again, a both/and may be more appropriate and still carry the force of focus that Brent wants to convey.

There is also the statement that reading poetry is closer to using a kaleidoscope than to using a microscope, a postmodern-modern dichotomy if ever there was one. Even though poetry is simply not straightforward, normal speech as found in a computer manual, the idea of a kaleidoscope does not convey to me the advancement of understanding. If the words of the prophets are anything, they are an unveiling of God's thoughts. That's what revelation is. The image of a kaleidoscope brings to mind distortion rather than unveiling, an uncertain image rather than a picture of what is really there to be seen. Brent's intention is certainly to show that a literalistic rendering sometimes ignores the emotional impacts of statements (and this is something I agree with). His example of "hitting you so hard your mother feels it" was clearly picturesque. I agree that poetry is "language with the volume turned up." On the other hand, however, I do not want to describe my pursuit of poetic meaning with language that diminishes the idea of seeing the revelatory text as it is from God.

### *Lens Six*

Brent's sixth lens is simply put as *illocution*, a term brought over into discussions of evangelical hermeneutics from speech act theory. Illocution primarily refers to the function of a passage, that is, how the speaker wishes the hearers to respond. I must confess that I am not sure yet about the wisdom of invoking speech act theory in our hermeneutics. At one level, I see it as simply relabeling things that are going on that in the past we viewed as certain elements in the context of a passage. Hopefully we are not simply rearranging the chairs on the deck of the Titanic! Perhaps some useful benefits can come about by its use that will help us pay closer attention to the details of the text, maybe details we have too often ignored. Perhaps, as one of my students suggested, it might even help us defend doctrines such as inerrancy as we sort through the conundrums offered in various texts. I do not believe I am qualified at this point to answer those kinds of questions with any definitive answers. Brent believes pretty strongly in the current use of speech act theory, especially the use of illocution in understanding prophecy. He comments, "Missing this point means missing the meaning of the speaker." I think that Brent means by "meaning" that the main point of the speaker's meaning will not be seen or that it will be incomplete. With that I would have no quarrel in most passages since the speaker often speaks, as we all do, with an action in mind, and not just to give an

information dump (although there might be exceptions). However, in a technical sense, there is always locution in a text and sometimes perlocution, so we can not say absolutely that we have uncovered no meaning until we have seen the illocution. However, Brent's main point stands. We must clearly seek out as part of the context what the speaker wishes the hearers to do and take that into account as part of our interpretation if the text actually yields that information. In doing so, we must avoid any subjective guessing as to what he might wish his hearers to do.

### *Lenses Seven and Eight*

In the last two lenses of interpretation that Brent gives us, he turns to the issue of the interpreters of prophecy themselves rather than to issues in the text. He states two principles: (1) we must rid ourselves of our modernistic presuppositions and get rid of our suspicion of poetry; (2) we must give up a futuristic focus on prophecy in order to see the most important issues of social justice and ethics that is demanded of the original audience and perhaps by application to us. I hope I have expressed these correctly. I have summarized in my own words.

As to the first principle, I must protest a little. I am not suspicious of poetry because of my commitment to Enlightenment principles. I am suspicious of poetry because of my English lit teacher in college. He taught us about the powerful teaching of John Donne's early seventeenth-century poem *The Flea*. It was a poem about a young man trying to seduce a coy maiden by convincing her it would not hurt her any more than a flea bite. My teacher, a full-blown pagan, taught our class that the story was an allegory expressing the doctrine of the Trinity: the man, the maiden, and the flea as the Father, Son, and Spirit. This was said even though the evidence might suggest that Donne's poem was pre-conversion. In my opinion, it was a poem that should have been taken more at "face-value" like the book of Romans to get the intended meaning of the love poem.

I think Brent is right at one level. We avoid poetry sometimes because it *is* slippery. The reason for this is that it is simply harder literature. It takes longer for us to understand it clearly in the context. I am not yet ready to write that off as due mainly to a commitment to Enlightenment thinking and reductionistic assumptions. It is merely not as "easy" as Paul, although some New Testament scholars work hard to make us think differently! Let me also suggest that one of the reasons that we are better at epistles than we are at the poetry of Old Testament prophets is that we spend more time in the areas of the Bible that are more directly applicable to us in church life. This, of course, can be to the detriment of our overall theology. However, I think, on the whole, dispensationalism as a historical movement has helped to recover much of the Old Testament's dynamic message and its true Jewish heritage. It is wise to suggest that we become more and more comfortable reading and understanding the poetic sections of the prophets.

As to the second principle, it is true that there are among us, especially in our churches, those who seem to see a prediction of our future written in every prophecy. We don't want to take on the worst of TV preachers here, but we do need to assert the need for balanced reading of prophetic texts that takes into account *all* the concerns of any given text as written. I am glad that Brent affirms that prediction is present in prophecy although I want to be careful not to diminish it too much. We are back to a both/and scenario. Brent's football analogy about looking at the referees during a football game rather than the players was instructive, but I would tweak it somewhat. The referees are too remote in my opinion to represent the futurism in many prophecies. I think a better analogy would be to see the players running a play as representative of God's intentions for the original audience as expressed in a text. The overall drives in the game and the ultimate goal of winning in the game would represent the long-term predictive nature of a prophecy if such existed. I don't want to convey the notion that prediction in prophecy is merely a sideline item, but part of the overall game in a more major way than a referee at a football game, who in the end, is just a spectator of the game, although one with some authority to change it.

One final note on this notion of futurism versus the social and ethical implications of prophecies involves once again my penchant for a both/and. It seems to me that there is no inherent conflict between the predictive nature of a passage, even one that has long term fulfillment in mind, and the immediate social and ethical demands of the passage. I think of Daniel and Revelation on this score. I consider the predictions of 1 & 2 Thessalonians and the often overlooked focus on the Second Coming in 1 Peter. All of these passages and many more demand immediate action and attitudes on the part of God's people, most often during times of struggles and persecutions, *in light of long term developments*. I can live ethically and righteously in the present time on the basis of many things, one of which is the future hope that God has promised me, including rewards and ultimate removal of the curse. In fact, the notion that the future hope is laid out within the scope of a detailed predictive plan of rapture, tribulation, Second Coming, millennium, new heaven and new earth only strengthens our faith that God is sovereign in history and will bring about our every hope as He has promised in His many words. With such a great hope for tomorrow I can live now with great courage. So could Isaiah, Jeremiah, Daniel, and the people of God in their day.

### **Plowshares and Pruning Hooks**

I come now to Brent's comments providing an update on his book. I am grateful to say that I can heartily agree with some of the things he says in this section. First, he affirms the usual dispensational opposition to allegory and to the "ignoring of authorial intent in its historical and cultural context." Related to this, he also asserts that the notion of grammatical-historical interpretation (sometimes called literal interpretation) is an issue quite different from debating whether a particular expression is a figure of speech or a straight-forward statement. The latter seems to be the main concern that he has in his paper and in the book.

Far and away the most positive feature of Brent's paper is the abandoning of the metaphor of *translucence* to describe the nature of prophecy. This is one element in his book, although not the only one, which drove my students to evaluate his work as subjective. He now clarifies: "Though not identified as a fault by reviewers, I have reconsidered my use of the metaphor of *translucence* to describe prophecy. I am concerned that describing prophecy as ambiguous misrepresents the prophet's message. They spoke clearly and forcefully." It is simply not possible to say that prophecy is so powerful (as Brent often does) when at the same time it is so ambiguous. Otherwise, its power would lie in mysticism. This is a positive step in my opinion and Brent is to be applauded for taking it and stating it this way. The fruit of this change may be enormous.

Nonetheless, there are some concerns that still exist in my mind. I speak chiefly of the big picture versus details, the either/or, that Brent voices in his method. He notes that "despite the freedom of prophets to speak in colorful ways, understanding their message is not difficult—insofar as we stand back and take in the big picture...Our understanding of the specifics of the prophetic message, however, is not as clear." Further, he hangs on to the concept of translucence (from the reader's point of view, not the prophet's) when he says "the notion that prophecy is translucent only applies if we fail to understand prophetic poetry and seek to discover details about what is going to happen in the imagery the prophets employed." Later he will again argue that "prophecy becomes translucent when we go hunting for details."

It is here that I invoke my "both/and" penchant once again and show a concern on the other side of the spectrum from Brent's thoughts. While I do not suggest that in each and every case details are as clear as the big idea of any passage, I want to argue that the details, even in poetic prophecy, have an important place in the interpretive process of prophecy. Let me ease into the discussion with an appeal to a prophetic parable from Luke 19:11-27, the parable of the minas. Just before Jesus enters Jerusalem at the triumphal entry he tells this parable. The big picture is quite clear since it is exegetically stated in verse 11. Jesus told them the parable was given for the purpose of letting the

crowds know (if they would receive it) that the kingdom was not going to occur right away in keeping with their expectations. The details of the actual parable show at least the following elements: (1) a nobleman representing Christ who is going to leave and then later return, (2) citizens/enemies representing those who reject Him (including the Jewish leaders), (3) slaves representing followers of Christ, (4) rewards given to the slaves when the nobleman returns which are described in administrative terms, the ruling common to kingdom passages. It is these details which actually frame and yield the plot line that teaches the big idea. The details with their symbolism are rather clear in this particular parable and provide a powerful and picturesque way for the audience to grasp the didactic statement in verse 11. In my early days as a Christian I was taught that the details of parables mattered. When I got to seminary, they knocked that notion out of me suggesting that only the big idea of the parable mattered. Over the years I have moved back toward the middle and a “both/and” where a synergy exists between details and big picture. One of the reasons is that when Jesus interprets parables on rare occasions, he actually discusses the details. I do not think Brent is doing away with details. Instead, he wants to make sure they are not the main avenue of interpretation. My concern is that the constant downplaying of details may be overkill which will truncate the intended message of God.

A second example may be more instructive and certainly raises more questions in my mind. In Ezekiel 40-48 we see what traditional dispensationalists have often described as millennial truth. The details of this prophetic portion of Scripture are many. One can get lost in the minutiae easily. In this vision there are the fine points of temple construction, the glory of God filling the temple as well as various offerings, gates, and land allotments. Do these details matter? Could it be that Ezekiel 40-48 is one large extended metaphor with one big idea? If so, what would that idea be? Without the details mattering, the big picture of the entire passage (which I do not take as an extended metaphor) could easily be quite vague and ambiguous, even bordering on non-textual or allegorical understandings. I am not saying that Brent is doing this. I am simply stating my concern about an overemphasis on the either/or of big picture versus details. This is where the words of Elliott Johnson, which Brent mentions, come in. Johnson noted that the discussion of hyperbole and figures of speech in *Plowshares*, actually its overall handling of language, lends itself to a deemphasizing of literal interpretation by not taking into account that even metaphorical language must “refer to an actual referent.” This is crucial in thinking about details. If details matter little, then a lot of referents are in jeopardy of being ignored. At stake may be grammatical-historical interpretation. Thus, I am much more comfortable with a “both/and” approach to the big picture and the details which yield it.

I think Brent wrote *Plowshares* because he thought something was quite wrong with our handling of prophecy. It seems to come out mostly in the level of importance of details in prophetic poetry. It is also evident in Brent’s earlier references in his paper to what the popular books and preachers have done with those details. I want Brent to know that I do not sensationalize prophecy. I try hard not to insert the eschaton into prophetic passages where it does not belong. I do not find the panorama of the ages in almost every narrative as Arno Gaebeli tried to do. I try not to ignore hyperbole as a figure of speech. I do not find the rapture lurking behind every simile in poetry and prose.

What do I find? A pagan friend of mine once told me that the message of the prophets is “Woe is me! Things are going to be bad!” He had some of this right. Of course there is the call to repentance that must be taken seriously for the generation to whom the texts were written and to those who follow by way of application. A temporal redemption is needed. I take the book of Amos as almost paradigmatic. After a lively introduction invoking judgment upon pagans and Judah, the southern prophet sent up north hammers Israel for its forsaking of God’s law and the lack of righteous and ethical behavior in point after point. This needed to be changed and constitutes the big picture of Amos. However, one still notices at the end of the book, a short and abruptly introduced conclusion that gives predictive prophecy to announce the restoration of the unity of David’s house and the end of

the divided kingdom (Amos 9:11-15). Moreover, the restoration that is envisioned calls upon the eschaton with the words “I will plant them on their land, and they will not again be rooted out from their land which I have given them.” I do not take this as hyperbole, but as the promise of the longed-for eschaton. Such a prediction and promise is not out of place here. I am not inserting it where it does not belong. God’s ultimate fulfillment for the nation becomes a basis for the rest of the book to be viewed through glasses of hope as well as judgment language. This seems to me to be characteristic of the style of the prophets.

In light of these discussions, I would like to know from Brent how sick he believes our dispensational approach to be overall. If the patient is dispensational hermeneutics, does it have a cold or terminal cancer or something in between? I personally think we need a regimen of over-the-counter stuff and not major surgery. *Plowshares* (in spite of many good observations) comes across somewhat like major surgery.

### **A Hermeneutical Methodology for Interpreting Prophecy**

In the next section of his paper, Brent establishes three orbits of interpretation which are interlocking but distinct. The first is *contextual reading*. I believe this is simply exegesis using the grammatical-historical method. With this I have no problem and see it as logically first in Brent’s approach and in mine. He does speak of “isolating a text *from* progressive revelation” which I take to mean that he attempts to understand the text relative to its own time and not the giving of later revelation. I hope I have understood him on this point. I might prefer to say that contextual reading entails “reading a text *using* progressive revelation, i.e., using the historical part of grammatical-historical method to fix the time within which the considered text must be studied. If I have understood Brent on this point, we are on the same page.

The second orbit of interpretation he cites is the *redemptive metanarrative of the OT*. The canonical focus of this step looks at the theological synthesis of a text with other areas of the OT outside of the text at hand including a complete look at the entire OT itself. Logically, it should follow the first step or orbit which Brent mentions. This step is in harmony with what I teach as long as the idea of redemption is not narrowed to the individual alone and includes the redemption of national, community, and creation elements as well.

The third orbit of interpretation is the assertion of an *already/not yet kingdom*. As a traditionalist, of course, I am not in agreement on this point. It is not clear to me if Brent is viewing this as a conclusion or a grid by which to read other things. This well-worn debate among dispensationalists will probably not add anything to our discussion here, so I will not labor on it. Rather, I am going to suggest that Brent is better served by rewording his statement of the third orbit using his later assertions. Perhaps “Christological reading” or “NT recontextualizing of OT meaning in light of Christological significance” would serve better. In that way he would stay away from a controversial conclusion that would hinder dialog with traditionalists on this matter. I am happy that Brent includes how the “OT meaning informs the referents of NT concepts.” This is a major concern of traditionalists. We would probably have something to discuss passage by passage in any NT recontextualization of OT promise relative to Messiah. I would want such recontextualization not to be understood as a cancelling of OT promise. In addition, it would seem to me that the NT readings under consideration here are contextual readings in their own right that should be followed up by a theological synthesis for the entire NT canon along the lines of what is done for the OT. This may need to be done before finalizing conclusions about any alleged NT recontextualization of the OT especially when OT passages are used multiple times in NT texts.

## The Book of Joel

Brent finishes his paper by examining the books of Joel and Zephaniah relative to the three orbits of interpretation which he has established. I am running out of space to deal in detail with his statements point by point for these sections. So I am going to confine my thoughts here to what I consider to be the most interesting issue, namely, the concept of the day of the Lord in the book of Joel.

I have to agree with Brent that dispensational interpreters have sometimes missed the mark in defining this term. Certainly, the vast number of interpretive options should convince us to be cautious in our teaching in the matter. Almost all dispensational interpreters will give a general definition something along the lines of a time or event in history when God breaks through in judgment (usually upon Israel but not necessarily). It can have a near meaning in certain contexts (i.e., if one takes the locusts as a day of the Lord judgment near in time to Joel's own day). It can also function as a predictive term for judgment involving end-time events (e.g., 2 Thess. 2:2-4). However, after these general ideas, the impression of disarray is startling. I have heard the day of the Lord defined in the following ways relative to end-time events: (1) the judgment events associated with the coming of Christ to earth at the end of the tribulation period; (2) the severe destruction events associated with the judgment by fire at the end of the millennium (2 Peter 3:10-13); (3) the millennium so that # 1 and # 2 can both be covered by a definite period of time; (4) the last three and one half years of the tribulation (i.e., the Great Tribulation); (5) the last three and one half years of the tribulation plus the millennium to encompass all previous things on the list; (6) the entire seven years of the tribulation period, and (7) the entire seven years of the tribulation period plus the millennium to encompass all previous things on the list.

Right away when confronted with such a record, I am easily convinced that we have wrongfully turned a non-technical term into a technical term that means the same thing most places in the text and as a result are struggling with it. It is better I think to suggest that the day of the Lord is simply a concept. It is God breaking through in history in judging acts. This term is applied in many different contexts. The term itself does not bring its own definition beyond the simple definition above. The context of each usage will help us to know the event or time period under consideration for any *particular* day of the Lord. To be sure, I do believe that the Thessalonian correspondence especially lends itself to seeing what we call the seven-year tribulation period as the day of the Lord. Coupled with some OT usage, it seems that one use of the term relative to end-time events is to see it as a time period when Israel and the Gentile nations are judged by God. Furthermore, this time is immediately prior to the restoration of Israel to its land in ultimate kingdom restoration.<sup>7</sup> However, this should not be taken to mean that every occurrence of the term has this time reference. I think Brent and I are in absolute agreement on this point.

Now back to Joel. Does the day of the Lord terminology in this particular prophet lend itself to an eschatological interpretation and, if so, on what grounds? Brent answers in the negative partly because cosmic imagery which is often cited to justify the eschatological view can be found in contexts where there is no eschatology. In particular, Brent draws our attention to Habakkuk 3:4-11. Secondly, he views Joel as not pointing to the details of how God was going to judge (regardless of the timing), but as focusing on the impact it should have on the lives of the reader.

Let me briefly respond to these concerns. I think the appeal to Habakkuk is a good one to establish that cosmic signs alone are not enough to establish an eschatological overtone. However, there are a couple of points to be made in response. First, the cosmic sign verses of Joel, unlike those given in Habakkuk, contain some statements of permanence: "there has never been anything like it,

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<sup>7</sup> See Randall Price, "OT Tribulation Terms" in *When the Trumpet Sounds* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House, 1995), 58-83.

nor will there be again after it to the years of many generations” (2:2). In fact, this is only one of five such statements of permanence in Joel.<sup>8</sup> Brent will probably say this is part of hyperbolic and poetic speech which is a detail that should not be sought. To do so would be to obscure the major point of personal response sought by Joel. However, I believe my view is a plausible one exegetically. Beyond that, when I do theological synthesis with other texts (recall Brent’s second and third orbits of interpretation), I find similar wording to Joel 2:2 in two other texts elsewhere in the Bible, both of which are clearly eschatological. One is Daniel 12:1 (“And there will be a time of distress such as never occurred since there was a nation until that time”) and the other is Matthew 24:21 (“for then there will be a great tribulation, such as has not occurred since the beginning of the world until now, nor ever shall”). This in my mind at least raises the possibility of eschatological intentions. I do not see this as necessarily cutting off the consideration of personal response for the original audience of Joel or present day readers.

Second, the sequence in Joel of judgment, restoration of Judah and Jerusalem (3:1), and a judgment of the nations (3:2-12) correlates quite nicely with later revelation given in Matthew 24-25. Brent might say that my correlation here is the “result of reading the OT through the lens of the NT and through one particular eschatological system.” I do not believe so. I am simply making the inductive observation that the flow of one matches the sequencing and content of the other. Although the Christological component is not clearly spelled out in Joel, I am in the ballpark of the third orbit of interpretation. I am doing a theological synthesis across testaments involving the repetition of common elements. This is another way that the eschatological possibility is brought to attention in the book of Joel.

Finally, let me say a word about Brent’s concern once again that the eschatological approach to the book of Joel is a searching for details that obscures the real, practical message of Joel. It has puzzled me throughout to understand the prophets this way. It seems to me that various *details* in the text highlight this real practical message that God gives. Why is it kosher to find those details in the text but not eschatological ones? I am not suggesting we import eschatology into a text when there is no basis for it. But it seems to me that there may be in Brent’s system an unjustified selectivity when viewing the exegetical facts of the prophetic texts.

### Conclusion

I can honestly say that I have enjoyed reading Brent’s paper and interacting with it. I have shown many areas of agreement as well as those of difference. Since some of my responses were done with just one hour of sleep earlier this week, there may be some startling theology that needs to be jettisoned! I am open to being corrected especially if I have misunderstood his work. In the end, Brent should be happy that, since reading *Plowshares and Pruning Hooks*, I probably spend more time considering hyperbole when I read the prophets. This is so even when I do not buy into his overall system of interpretation.

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<sup>8</sup> There are at least four other statements of permanence as I call them in Joel—2:19 (“I will never again make you a reproach among the nations”); 2:26 (“Then my people will never be put to shame”); 3:17 (“So Jerusalem will be holy, and strangers will pass through it no more”), and 3:20 (“But Judah will be inhabited forever, and Jerusalem for all generations”).