

On the Road to Armageddon: How Evangelicals Became Israel's Best Friend. Timothy P. Weber. Grand Rapids: Baker, 2004.

In the 1990s the so-called “evangelical critique” literature exploded on the scene as those within the ranks of evangelicalism such as D. A. Carson, David Wells, and Mark Noll attempted to identify what was wrong with the movement as a whole. Now, the first decade of the twenty-first century is seeing an explosion of “dispensational critique” literature in which dispensationalism (especially the more traditional version of the movement) is being analyzed and criticized hermeneutically, historically, politically, and ethically. However, most of this literature is not “in-house.” It is being written by those outside of the dispensational movement. One such writer is former dispensationalist Timothy Weber who has had for almost thirty years an interest in the history of dispensationalism and premillennialism from an outsider’s perspective.

Weber’s most recent work is *On the Road to Armageddon*. The subtitle yields some of the concerns which Weber voices. Although he uses the word *evangelical* in the subtitle (“How Evangelicals Became Israel’s Best Friend”), the work by the historian Weber is actually a negative analysis of how dispensationalism has influenced evangelicalism toward a pro-Israel position in Middle-Eastern political affairs. In the introductory chapter, Weber notes that his book “tells the story of how dispensationalist evangelicals became Israel’s best friends in the last part of the twentieth century and what difference that friendship has made in recent times” (9). The last section of that chapter, entitled “This Book in a Nutshell,” fleshes this out in more detail:

The book’s thesis is easily stated: Before the founding and expansion of Israel, dispensationalists were more or less content to teach their doctrine, look for signs of the times, and predict in sometimes great detail what was going to happen in the future

But all that changed after Israel reclaimed its place in Palestine and expanded its borders. For the first time, dispensationalists believed that it was necessary to leave the bleachers and get onto the playing field to make sure the game ended according to the divine script. As the world edged closer and closer to the end, dispensationalists became important players in their own game. When they shifted from observers to participants, they ran the risk of turning their predictions into self-fulfilling prophecies (15).

In the end, Weber's main concern appears to be ethical: "Dispensationalists' views of Bible prophecy also make them skeptical about and sometimes even opposed to efforts to bring peace to the Middle East. Such behavior helps to create the kind of world that dispensationalists have been predicting, a world in which they do not expect they will have to live."

A few strengths of Weber's book should be mentioned. First, there is clarity in presentation. The reader is not left guessing what his general direction and understanding happens to be. Second, Weber raises an important issue that is worth discussing, although this reviewer disagrees with conclusions about his concern. That concern involves the relationship between dispensationalists, Israel, and current political events. Dispensationalists must be careful not to be a "pro-war" faction in terms of Middle-Eastern geo-politics without clear biblical and ethical warrant. Third, Weber does at times show the good side of dispensationalists, such as the presence of social action in their history and the positive missionary thrust that they have exhibited (61). Thus, he is not entirely negative to his former group. Fourth, the book demonstrates a breadth of resources which can be gleaned from the notes and the bibliography which will service all scholars who wish to study the history of dispensationalism.

However, it is this reviewer's opinion that *On the Road to Armageddon* has more breadth than depth. In the end, it lacks accuracy and comprehensiveness in its analysis. There is a suspicion that arises in the reader's mind that part of the reason for this is the author's bias against dispensationalism at the outset. This bias comes out clearly in a few ways early in the book. First, in the introductory chapter Weber uses a guilt-by-association setup of dispensationalists in his section on "Millennialist Groups in America." He lists several of those within the early American experience and by means of this list frames dispensationalism in a negative light. It is especially enlightening that the specific list of people and groups surrounding his discussion of the "disgruntled" John Nelson Darby include bizarre and cultist groups: the Shakers, Jon Noyes, Mormons, Millerites, Jehovah's Witnesses, David Koresh and the Branch Davidians, and Heaven's Gate. Darby and the Plymouth Brethren are placed between the Jehovah's Witnesses and David Koresh. Notwithstanding Weber's attempt to add qualifications in the next section of the chapter, the damage is already done when reading. This is not the way to make one's initial presentation of the historical group being analyzed. If Weber believes dis-

dispensationalists are on the same par with these groups, he is justified in introducing it this way. However, the rest of his work does not suggest that he does. Thus, his method of writing in this way does not lend itself to scholarly dialogue but comes across as biased and pejorative.

The second way that Weber early on in his work leaves the impression of bias toward dispensationalists is his refusal to debunk the false and fantastic claim that Darby stole his secret rapture idea from a deluded teenage girl named Margaret McDonald who was a member of the Irvingites. To be fair to Weber, he does not embrace the thesis, but leaves it an open question. Many clear and level-headed rebuttals of this erroneous charge have been made over the years by dispensationalists, rebuttals with which Weber does not interact. Furthermore, more detailed studies have emerged over the last twenty years in the history of various dispensationalists including Darby. The climate of Darby's day in post-Napoleonic Europe led to all kinds of discussions about the Bible among all kinds of people. Interestingly, there is an absence of any discussion by Weber of the influence of Trinity College in Dublin on Darby, a major oversight in trying to find the historical seeds of Darby's thoughts. In this light, it is not surprising then that Weber almost apologetically states that "without conclusive evidence, we may have to settle for Darby's own explanation" (25). Furthermore, the ongoing studies of the history of dispensationalism are showing pre-Darby references to a two-phase second coming as seen in the controversial Pseudo-Ephraem, the medieval writings of Brother Dolcino, and Morgan Edwards. Current studies are surfacing other references so that discussions of this nature will be moot. This leaves Weber in a precarious position when he states in a matter-of-fact (perhaps dogmatic) manner, "Before Darby, all premillennialists, futurists included, believed that the rapture would occur at the end of the tribulation, at Christ's second advent" (24). Thus, at this point early in the book, a dispensationalist is reading with some skepticism about Weber's perspective, believing that Weber possesses a disposition to believe the worst about dispensationalism.

Another weakness of *On the Road to Armageddon* is the lack of theological sophistication. To be sure, Weber is a historian, not a theologian. However, he is chronicling theological developments and at times making pronouncements based upon them. The dispensationalist who reads his analysis will come away wondering if Weber is shallow, and any unsuspecting nondispensationalist may

come away with false ideas. A few examples will suffice. Early on in the book, Weber remarks that premillennialism (dispensationalism is uppermost in his mind) is a “speculation” that is “rooted in a prophetic passage in the last book of the Bible (Revelation 20) . . .” (9–10). Such a statement would not have been made by someone who thoroughly understood the dispensational premillennial position. The dispensational understanding of Christ’s premillennial coming is rooted or grounded in OT promises to Israel and not in Revelation 19–20. While the teaching from the book of Revelation certainly supports the premillennial outline, dispensationalists have consistently grounded their arguments in the OT biblical covenants and kingdom promises (see J. Dwight Pentecost, *Things to Come*, and Charles Ryrie, *The Basis of the Premillennial Faith*).

In addition, Weber comments that “Darby’s system promised to simplify and organize the Bible’s message, but dispensationalism turned out to be anything but simple” (21). The dispensationalist will ask “simple compared to what?” Certainly covenant theology is a theological position that has a reputation for being difficult to grasp at times. In the era following the first release of the Scofield Reference Bible, many comments were given by common church members about how it simplified Bible study. Along the same lines, Weber describes dispensationalists as putting a “complex dispensational system” upon their Bible study while forcing the “Bible’s content to pass through its interpretive grids, which made their method deductive through and through” (39). Dispensational readers of his book will, for the most part, disregard this assertion. This reviewer spends much time in seminary classes on the subject showing how inductive study of the text leads to the system rather than the system being forced upon the text.

A few specific cases in point need to be made. Weber says with regard to the controversial postponement theory (or delay in the coming Messianic kingdom) that this theory was an invention of Darby to handle the seeming problem with the sixty-ninth and seventieth weeks of Daniel’s prophecy in 9:24–27 (22). The seventieth week did not follow immediately upon the heels of the sixty-ninth week. So how can one explain the delay? However, what Weber fails to do, and misleads the reader unfamiliar with Daniel’s prophecies as a result, is to note the exegetical basis for a gap between the sixty-ninth and seventieth week which is in the text of Daniel 9:24–27 and which every dispensational commentary describes. He prefers to leave the impression that the idea came out of thin air as Darby’s creation. A second case in point is Weber’s

description that the pre-trib rapture doctrine was merely a theological deduction based upon a set of presuppositions. This does not do justice to the appeal of most dispensationalists to such texts as 1 and 2 Thessalonians as an exegetical basis for the pre-trib rapture teaching.

One must give Weber some slack since he cannot give reasoning and analysis for every single dispensationalist's pronouncements upon some passage or concept. However, it is important for him to deal with the major ones and to be fair-minded when he does. At times he fails to do this. For example, when he notes that Hal Lindsey believed that the fig tree in the Olivet Discourse stood for Israel, he gives the general impression that this is "the" dispensational position on that passage (190). He does not seem to be aware that John Walvoord, one of Lindsey's teachers, and one of the most prominent dispensationalists of the period under discussion, did not hold to that view. Many dispensationalists agree with Walvoord's assessment that the figure of speech there is a natural and not a symbolic figure.

To move on from the lack of theological understanding of dispensational approaches to the Bible, one must also note in Weber's book some historical errors. For example, he seems to assert that Darby used the word *dispensationalism* when, in fact, that word may be a twentieth-century invention (22). Another place where such questions can be found is Weber's declaration that Arno C. Gaebelein (the Ph.D. dissertation topic for this reviewer) resisted dispensationalism until he came in contact with some of the Niagara Bible Conference figures (36). This does not do justice to the earlier impact of orthodox Jews upon Gaebelein nor his reading of Emile Guers, a Genevan pastor. However, Weber does mark the precise time when Gaebelein adopted a pre-trib rapture, although the overall presentation is oversimplified. Relative to Gaebelein this reviewer is not sure if Weber has fully processed his information. While criticizing (correctly) Gaebelein for initially accepting the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion* (an anti-Semitic writing used in Islamic countries even today), he then positively comments on Gaebelein's warnings about the dangers of Hitler and the Holocaust (136, 146). Finally, Weber leaves the impression that Gaebelein was anti-Semitic (206), a charge for which this reviewer defends Gaebelein (see *The Early Twentieth-Century Dispensationalism of Arno C. Gaebelein*, Lewiston, NY: Mellen Press, 2001). A final place where historical errors surface in the book is the general impression that Weber leaves that all of the premillennialists

or various pro-Israel groups mentioned in his book are actually dispensationalists when this is not the case according to dispensational historians such as Thomas Ice. While all dispensationalists are premillennialists, not all premillennialists or pro-Israel groups are dispensationalists.

At times Weber's writing style is irritating and borders on caricature. At other points, he seems to base his historical opinions on anecdotal evidence (see p. 219). His ethical concern that dispensationalists seem to be ignoring the Christian Arabs of the Middle East (and that Israel is doing them damage) seems to be misplaced and incomplete. Israel has cooperated with Christians in the area as far back as the 1982 defensive invasion of Lebanon to stop the katusha rocket launches into the nation from the PLO who were hiding in Lebanon. There are no Israeli homicide bombers who are going into neighboring countries today to blow up innocent women and children in public places. There is no pronouncement or action on Israel's part to annihilate any of the people groups or nations around them. Weber seems to be straining at gnats and swallowing camels on this point. In doing so, not only does he criticize the Israelis, he lays part of the blame at the feet of American dispensationalists for not wanting peace. While such criticism is gaining ground in some quarters of American evangelicalism, the fact remains that such criticism is overblown and does not represent the complete picture.

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