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KINGDOM HERMENEUTICS AND THE APOCALYPSE:  
A PROMOTION OF CONSISTENT LITERAL METHODOLOGY

CORY M. MARSH \*

I. INTRODUCTION

George Eldon Ladd undoubtedly espoused wisdom when he said, “The easiest approach to [the book of] Revelation is to follow one’s own particular tradition as the true view and ignore all others; but the intelligent interpreter must familiarize himself with the various methods of interpretation that he may criticize and purify his own view.”<sup>1</sup> It is in this Laddian spirit that the present paper will consider the hermeneutical approaches of several key eschatological positions concerning the book of Revelation, and in particular, the Kingdom ideas attached to each view.

However, rather than give a summary statement of the three different millennial positions,<sup>2</sup> the focus here will be to expose each position’s supporting *hermeneutical base* as that is where the differences originate. This will be done with a view to comparing and contrasting each position’s hermeneutical method against the backdrop of a consistently literal, grammatical-historical interpretation which results with the view that ἡ βασιλεία τοῦ θεοῦ is still awaiting a *future* and *literal* fulfillment—a position unique to the system known as Dispensational Premillennialism. As such, the key underlying feature of this paper is a promotion for consistent literal hermeneutics most notably as it relates to biblical prophecy.

II. THE FOUR APPROACHES

There are four popular hermeneutical approaches concerning the book of Revelation, which in turn affects one’s view of the Kingdom or Millennium.<sup>3</sup> Traditionally, these have been labeled: Preterist, Historicist, Idealist, and Futurist. Each of these eschatological views is derived from the hermeneutics employed to reach that particular position. That said, elements of literal, symbolic, and figurative expressions are recognized in each of these four, but the question to be

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\* Cory Marsh, M.Div., M.A. is an adjunct professor and Th.M. student at Southern California Seminary, 2075 E. Madison in El Cajon, CA.

<sup>1</sup> George E. Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1979), 619.

<sup>2</sup> That is, Pre-, Post-, and Amillennialism.

<sup>3</sup> For the purpose of this paper, the words Kingdom and Millennium are being used throughout synonymously (Rev 20:2-7; cf. 11:15).

answered is this: What was the Lord's *intended meaning* when he wrote the book through its human author? <sup>4</sup> As these approaches to Revelation are explored, it will be shown that only the futurist approach concerning the promised literal thousand year Kingdom is consistent with a grammatical-historical hermeneutic, and, because of that, does the most justice to the book of Revelation as a whole.

1. *Preterism*. According to Ladd, Preterism is "The prevailing interpretation of the Revelation in scholarship."<sup>5</sup> The Preterist position derives its name from the Latin root for "past" and sees Revelation today, not as predictive prophecy in any sense, but views the book as mostly apocalyptic in genre. Using heavy symbolism and metaphors distinct to what is often described as Jewish apocalyptic literature, Revelation is said to convey hidden meanings regarding past events already fulfilled. <sup>6</sup> Cornelius Venema, himself a preterist and president of Mid-America Reformed Seminary<sup>7</sup>, explains: "In this approach, the book of Revelation primarily refers to events that occurred in the past, either in the period prior to the destruction of the Jerusalem temple in A.D. 70 or in the early Christian centuries leading up to the destruction of the Roman Empire in the fifth century AD."<sup>8</sup> This approach favors allegorizing the book of Revelation in its basic hermeneutical method viz. finding various meanings for key events in the book rather than drawing out a single intended meaning. This method also serves as the foundational base for Amillennialism, an end-times position that does not see a future or literal component to the Kingdom (Rev 20:1-7); rather, it takes the "thousand years" in Rev 20:2-7 as purely symbolic.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> While the debate rages concerning the human author of Revelation, this writer agrees with the traditional view that the Apostle John, son of Zebedee, penned the book (cf. Rev 1:1, 4, 9; 22:8). For an excellent treatment defending this view from several angles, see: Robert L. Thomas, *Revelation 1-7: An Exegetical Commentary* (Chicago, IL: Moody, 1992), 2-19.

<sup>5</sup>George Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament*, 621.

<sup>6</sup> It is noteworthy that "Apocalyptic" as a specific literary genre was virtually unknown and unclassified until 19<sup>th</sup> century German theologians began studies on supposed Jewish apocalypticism. The term "apocalyptic literature," (technically, "apocalypses") as applied to Biblical and non-canonical books, seems not to have had its *official* consideration until the late 20<sup>th</sup> century by way of the Apocalypse Group of the Society of Biblical Literature's Genres Project from 1975 to 1978, which then led to the Uppsala Symposium coining the term in 1979. It has since been anachronistically applied to Revelation (cf. Rev 1:1) and sections of certain OT books ever since. Cf. Sara Robinson, "The Origins of Jewish Apocalyptic Literature: Prophecy, Babylon, and 1 Enoch" (master's thesis, University of South Florida, 2005), 2-3; Helge S. Kvanvig, *Roots of Apocalyptic: The Mesopotamian Background of the Enoch Figure and of the Son of Man* (North Rhine-Westphalia, Germany: Neukirchen-Verlag, 1988); David E. Aune, "The Apocalypse of John and the Problem of Genre," *Semina* 36 (1986): 67-91, as well as David Aune, *Revelation 1-5 Word Biblical Commentary* (Dallas, TX: Word), lxxvii-lxxx. For an older (preterist-idealist) treatment on Revelation that, before most, dogmatically classified the book under "apocalyptic literature," see Ray Summers, *Worthy of the Lamb: Interpreting the Book of Revelation in its Historical Background* (Nashville, TN: Broadman and Holman, 1951).

<sup>7</sup> Venema is used throughout this paper due to his fair assessment of the four end times views.

<sup>8</sup> Cornelius P. Venema, "Interpreting Revelation," *Table Talk* 36 no.1 (January 2012): 12. It should be noted the former date (prior to A.D.70) is the prevailing date of composition of Revelation by most Preterists. It is important to call attention to these specific dates as being crucial to the Preterist understanding of Revelation as a whole, and thus their eschatological position is entirely dependent on the actual dating of the book.

<sup>9</sup> Of this persuasion are Oswald Allis, R .C. Sproul, Michael Horton, and Kim Riddlebarger. Some forms of Preterism also support the Postmillennial position seeing the Church or gospel as ushering in the Kingdom—a

According to Riddlebarger, a proponent of this approach, the Millennium is currently being experienced today in the Church:

The promises to Israel, David, and Abraham, in the Old Testament are fulfilled by Jesus Christ and his church during this present age. The millennium is the period of time between the two advents of our Lord with the thousand years of Revelation 20 being symbolic of the entire interadvental age.<sup>10</sup>

Against the backdrop of a consistently literal grammatical-historical hermeneutic, the Preterist approach differs in that it fails to remain literal in regards to prophecy concerning Israel in the Hebrew Scriptures.<sup>11</sup> And as a result, preterism offers a distorted view of the Kingdom in Revelation. This approach must be rejected due to the violence of interpretation done in their abandonment of a consistent application of the grammatical-historical hermeneutic. In the Preterist allegorical approach, any distinction between Israel and the Church is totally lost as the latter swallows up the former. This is due to a structural hermeneutic that uses the New Testament (NT) to reinterpret key Old Testament (OT) prophetic texts.<sup>12</sup> When this is committed “replacement theology” or “supersessionism” is the result, which has been the notorious culprit behind much of the anti-Semitic attitudes throughout church history.<sup>13</sup> Vlach explains, “The supersessionist approach defangs the OT and does not allow the Hebrew Scriptures to speak to the issues they address such as God’s plans for the nation Israel.”<sup>14</sup>

Because the Scriptures are not taken literally all the way through in the preterist approach, the Bible’s last book is left to spiritual allegory which itself rests on the subjectivity of the interpreter to decipher multiple possible meanings. Because of this, the authorial intent of certain key passages such as Revelation 20 is lost as it is usurped by the intent of the interpreter who assigns foreign meaning to the text. Thus a literal future kingdom in the land of Israel is just

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kingdom that is literal or non literal depending on the theologian. Out of this Preterist-Postmillennial position was born the modern day Theonomist Movement (or Christian Reconstructionism) of which Greg Bahnsen and R. J. Rushdoony were pioneers, and Kenneth Gentry and Gary DeMar are today’s best known advocates.

<sup>10</sup> Kim Riddlebarger, *The Case for Amillennialism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2003), 31. An irresolvable question regarding this position is this: If we are in the Kingdom now, how does the Kingdom of God and the horrific tribulation(s) described by Jesus in Matt 24:3-29 exist simultaneously? Perhaps it is due to this dilemma that some Amillennialists have opted for a more neo-Platonist view that the Kingdom is presently experienced with life in heaven, while anything non-blissful pertains to life on earth. This dual metaphysical structure seems to be more reminiscent of ancient Greek philosophy rather than the result Biblical exegesis.

<sup>11</sup> E.g., Jer 31:2-4, 31-40; Dan 9:24-27; 12:1; Hos 14:4-7; Zech 1:17; 2:10-12; 12:10; 14:4-9, et al.

<sup>12</sup> For example using NT texts such as Rom 9:24-26 to justify the Church replacing Israel as the sole recipient of the New Covenant in Jer 31:31-40. Thus this hermeneutical strategy tends to *re-interpret* meanings found in the OT, not merely expand its applications.

<sup>13</sup> From the Latin *super* (on, upon) and *sedere* (to sit). Thus supersessionism is the view that the Church has permanently taken the seat of Israel, or, in other words, has replaced her and thus all promises given to that nation are now applied solely to the Church. Another view is that “Israel” in the OT always referred to the Church.

<sup>14</sup> Michael J. Vlach, *Has The Church Replaced Israel: A Theological Evaluation* (Nashville, TN: B&H, 2010), 96.

a fanciful dream. Pentecost, warning of the danger of this approach, solidifies why it should be rejected:

The basic authority in interpretation ceases to be the Scriptures, but the mind of the interpreter. The interpretation may then be twisted by the interpreter's doctrinal positions, the authority of the church to which the interpreter adheres, his social or educational background, or a host of other factors.<sup>15</sup>

2. *Historicism*. Venema states, "The Historist approach reads the book of Revelation as a visionary symbolization of the sequence of events that will occur throughout the course of the history of the church, from Christ's first coming until His second coming at the end of the present age."<sup>16</sup> In other words, the interpreter committed to historicism will read into the text of Revelation meanings for symbols that are considered to correspond directly to actual events throughout Church history.<sup>17</sup>

The historist position finds itself a major ally with the preterist approach in that both abandon the literal, grammatical-historical interpretation in favor of allegory. The historicist approach was a favorite among the Reformers who "identified the harlot of Babylon in Revelation 17 with the Roman Catholic Church and the papacy," while the medieval Church saw, "the Beast from the sea in Revelation 13 with the rise of Islam."<sup>18</sup> Like Preterism, the historist approach has no agreed upon use of a literal, futuristic Kingdom (Rev 20), and has *also* traditionally been a utilized hermeneutic for Amillennialists.<sup>19</sup> In favor of rejecting this hermeneutical outlook, Ladd notes a problem with historicism: "A major difficulty with this approach is that no consensus has been achieved as to what the outline of history foreseen in Revelation really is."<sup>20</sup> MacArthur rightfully takes it further by exposing in detail historicism's grave errors: "It ignores Revelation's claim to be prophecy [cf. Rev 1:3, 22:7, 18-19]. It also robs the book of any meaning for those first century-believers to whom it was addressed. And it removes the interpretation of Revelation from the realm of literal, historical hermeneutics, leaving it at the mercy of the allegorical and spiritualized meanings invented by each would-be interpreter."<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> J. Dwight Pentecost, *Things to Come: A Study in Biblical Eschatology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1982), 5.

<sup>16</sup> Cornelius P. Venema, "Interpreting Revelation," 12.

<sup>17</sup> There are technically two varieties of Historicism: (1) the "traditional-historical" approach which uses Greek and Oriental myths, and Jewish tradition as its interpretive lens for the book of Revelation; and (2) the "continuous historical approach," which is the dominant version, as it concerns Christian Church history, and is the one discussed here. Cf. Robert L. Thomas, *Evangelical Hermeneutics: The New Versus the Old* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, 2002), 329-31.

<sup>18</sup> Cornelius P. Venema, "Interpreting Revelation," 12.

<sup>19</sup> Yet, this approach has also been used by certain premillennialists such as I. Newton and H. Alford, as well as postmillennialist, D. Brown. Cf. Ladd, 622.

<sup>20</sup> George Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament*, 622.

<sup>21</sup> John MacArthur, *Revelation 1-11, MacArthur New Testament Commentary* (Chicago, IL: Moody, 1999), 10.

3. *Idealism*. Like its historicist cousin, the hermeneutical approach to the eschatological Kingdom called Idealism views the visions and symbols of Revelation as corresponding to life in the Church. However, its difference is seen in “its reluctance to identify any particular historical events, institutions, or people”<sup>22</sup> and thus adds a touch of mysticism. Rather than making direct correspondence to literal history, it pictures all of Revelation as the never-ending struggle between good and evil endured by the Church in each generation between Christ’s two advents.<sup>23</sup> Noting a major flaw with the Idealist approach, Ladd observes, “The objection to this view is that the genre of apocalyptic literature always used apocalyptic symbolism to *describe events in history*; and we must expect the Apocalypse [i.e., the book of Revelation] to share at least this feature with other books of its character.”<sup>24</sup> Also, like Historicism and Preterism, Idealism depends entirely on an abandonment of the grammatical-historical hermeneutic in favor of the allegorical method. Indeed, this is the common thread binding three of the four hermeneutical approaches. Concerning this interpretative method, MacArthur adds, “The book [of Revelation] is thus reduced to a collection of myths designed to convey spiritual truth.”<sup>25</sup> Therefore, like the other two, the idealist approach to NT eschatology must also be rejected.

4. *Futurism*. Of the four main interpretations concerning the eschatological Kingdom, it is only this last approach—futurist—that is derived from a consistent, literal hermeneutic. Because of its literal hermeneutical approach, this writer suggests futurism is the only proper interpreting conclusion for the book of Revelation as a whole.<sup>26</sup> It is the futurist approach that serves as the underlying support for the position known as Premillennialism—the eschatological camp that sees Christ’s return occurring *before* the future Millennium of Revelation 20. This was in fact the dominate end-times view of the first three hundred years of the Church. Men such as Papias, Irenaeus, Justin Martyr and Tertullian all held to a futurist approach in hermeneutics resulting in Premillennialism.<sup>27</sup> Concerning this fact, Theissen observes, “The early church was largely

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<sup>22</sup> Cornelius P. Venema, “Interpreting Revelation,” 12.

<sup>23</sup> 19<sup>th</sup> century Scottish theologian and commentator on Revelation, William Milligan, was a noted proponent of Idealism (as was Augustine and Jerome). Today, Sam Hamstra Jr. is a known idealist proponent—see Marvin C. Pate, ed., *Four Views on the Book of Revelation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1998), 93–132. Additionally, it appears the emergent field of Post-Colonial Biblical Criticism is a recent manifestation of Idealism.

<sup>24</sup> George Elden Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament* 622. In contrast to Ladd, this writer does not favor the literary categorizing of the Book of Revelation as “apocalyptic literature” (see n. 6 above). The book describes itself as “prophecy” five times—from cp 1 to cp 22 (Rev 1:3; 22:7, 10, 18, 19)—thus forming a notable *inclusio*. While the book might share features *common* in accepted apocalyptic works, it is best to let Scripture itself determine the literary genre—especially when explicitly stated. For a solid comparison highlighting the differences between prophetic literature and apocalyptic literature see Anonymous, “Interpretation Regarding the Millennial and Eternal State,” in *Progressive Dispensationalism: An Analysis of the Movement and Defense of Traditional Dispensationalism*, ed. by Ron J. Bigalke, Jr. (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2005), 307–23.

<sup>25</sup> John MacArthur, *Revelation 1-11, The MacArthur New Testament Commentary* 10.

<sup>26</sup> Of this persuasion are George Ladd, J. Dwight Pentecost, Henry Theissen, Robert Thomas, John MacArthur, Craig Blomberg, Mark Hitchcock, Christopher Cone, Norman Geisler, Charles Ryrie, and Darrel Bock. However, futurists (such as these men) differ on issues considering the particulars of doctrines of the Rapture and the Millennial Kingdom as will be shown.

<sup>27</sup> Cf. Irenaeus *Against Heresies* V; Papias *Fragment* IV, VI; “Barnabas” *The Epistle of Barnabas* XV; Justin Martyr *Dialogue with Trypho* cp. LXXX; Tertullian *Against Marcion* III:XXV.

premillennial. Eschatology was not clearly systematized in the early centuries, but certain early writings can be drawn upon to support the fact that during the first three centuries of the church, premillennialism was widely held.”<sup>28</sup> This futurist-premillennial view while being the position of the author, in addition understands the Millennium as comprised of a literal thousand years, and will serve as the complete fulfillment of the Abrahamic, Land, and Davidic covenants originally given to Israel.<sup>29</sup>

It is also the futurist position that follows most closely Jesus’ own stated structure of the book of Revelation in 1:19: “Write therefore the things *which you have seen* [ἃ εἶδες], and the things *which are* [ἃ εἰσὶν], and the things *which shall take place after these things* [ἃ μέλλει γενέσθαι μετὰ ταῦτα]” (emphasis added). With this verse as the book’s interpreting guide, Futurism understands chapter one of Revelation as John’s incredible vision of Christ,<sup>30</sup> chapters 2–3 (the seven letters to seven specific churches) as historical local churches as well as representative of the Church since the days of Pentecost,<sup>31</sup> and chapters 4–22 as still future events waiting to be fulfilled. This follows precisely the “things seen,” “things which are,” and “things after these.”

The futurist approach to Revelation, with its resulting Premillennialism—and literal thousand year view of the Kingdom—is the only proper outlook on eschatology as it is based on a straightforward reading of the book, that is, a *consistent* application of the literal, grammatical-historical hermeneutic. This does not mean, however, that futurism sees no symbolic meaning or figures of speech inside Revelation.<sup>32</sup> It simply means any such figures carry with it one straightforward interpretation as opposed to the allegorical, mystical, or spiritual approach guiding the other three interpretations above. Robert Thomas agrees: “Only the futurist approach

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<sup>28</sup> Henry C. Theissen, *Lectures in Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1983), 365. Confirming this assessment is Church historian, and non-premillennialist, Philipp Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, 8 vols. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1973), 2:614: “The most striking point in the eschatology of the ante-Nicene age is the prominent chiliasm, or millenarianism, that is the belief of a visible reign of Christ in glory on earth with the risen saints for a thousand years, before the general resurrection and judgment. It was indeed not the doctrine of the church embodied in any creed or form of devotion, but a widely current opinion of distinguished teachers, such as Barnabas, Papias, Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, Tertullian, Methodius, and Lactantius.”

<sup>29</sup> For a helpful 10 point defense of Premillennialism, see Paige Patterson, *Revelation* New American Commentary: An Exegetical and Theological Exposition of Holy Scripture (Nashville, TN: B&H, 2012), 36–40.

<sup>30</sup> This first verb, εἶδες (you have seen/come to know), is the only aorist active indicative 2<sup>nd</sup> person singular verb in the sequence in v.19 highlighting its past (or perfective) aspect and singular application to John himself. This underscores the fact that only John saw the revelation of Jesus Christ having already occurred in chapter one. See n. 51 for further exegesis concerning this rich verb from Rev 1:19.

<sup>31</sup> This view, labeled “extreme futurist” by George Ladd, differs from his own “moderate futurist” view in that while he agrees that Rev 1-3 represent all the churches throughout history, his futurism does not occur until Rev 7. Cf. Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament*, 624.

<sup>32</sup> Unfortunately, this is an all too common mischaracterization of futurists, particularly of premillennial-dispensationalists, by non-futurists. It is noteworthy (and ironic to this false charge!) that the definitive textbook on figures of speech still used today, *Figures of Speech used in the Bible*, was written by the futurist (and ultra-dispensationalist), E. W. Bullinger in 1898. While some of Bullinger’s beliefs were questionable, his scholarship concerning figures of speech in Scripture is unmatched. The point made here is that Bullinger proves futurists understand and recognize non-literal speech in the book of Revelation, as well as the rest of the Bible for that matter.

to the book grants sufficient recognition to the [book's] prophetic style and a normal hermeneutical pattern of interpretation based on that style."<sup>33</sup> Pentecost explains further:

The purpose of figurative language is to impart some literal truth, which may more clearly be conveyed by the use of figures than in any other way....Perhaps the primary consideration in relation to the interpretation of prophecy is that, like all other areas of Biblical interpretation, it must be interpreted literally. Regardless of the form through which the prophetic revelation is made, through that form some literal truth is revealed.<sup>34</sup>

MacArthur sums up nicely the superiority of the futurist approach to Revelation against the background of the other three methods above. This, he does, by highlighting futurism's consistent use of a literal interpretation of Scripture:

The futurist approach sees in chapters 4-22 predictions of people and events still yet to come in the future. Only this approach allows Revelation to be interpreted following the same literal, grammatical-historical hermeneutical method by which non-prophetic portions of Scripture are interpreted. As previously noted, proponents of the other three approaches are frequently forced to resort to allegorizing or spiritualizing the text to sustain their interpretations. The futurist approach, in contrast to the other three, does full justice to Revelation's claim to be a prophecy.<sup>35</sup>

### III. DISPENSATIONAL PREMILLENNIALISM

In contrast to the many disagreements within non-dispensational camps, Dispensational Premillennialism enjoys wholesale agreement within its camp as to what it believes regarding the end times. This positive feature, particular to this brand of Premillennialism, is wrought by a *consistent* application of the literal interpretation of Scripture. It is this hermeneutical conviction—distinct to Dispensationalism—that dispensational-premillennialists find their strongest pillar, and enjoy the unrivaled solidarity within its members. Dale Dewitt, tracing the

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<sup>33</sup> Robert L Thomas, *Evangelical Hermeneutics: The New Versus the Old* (Grand Rapids, MI: 2002), 331.

<sup>34</sup> J. Dwight Pentecost, *Things to Come*, 42-43, 60. It should be noted that this writer does not particularly favor the term "figurative language" when describing the events in Revelation. *The semantics and syntax John used was literal; the vision itself was figurative*. Or, to say it another way: John used literal words to describe a figure he was looking at. The real question at play (answered most satisfactorily by the literal hermeneutic) is what did the *figure* mean, not the words—the words are readily understandable.

<sup>35</sup> John MacArthur, *Revelation 1-11*, 10. It worth noting that some interpreters follow a fifth hermeneutical approach to Revelation referred to as the "eclectic" approach. This approach amalgamates the other four into one in an attempt to see the good in each method. However, just as with the other non-literal approaches mentioned earlier, the eclectic approach abandons a consistent application of literal hermeneutics and thus results in, this author suggests, a *schizophrenic hermeneutic* that leaves the interpretation to the whim of the interpreter and to whatever approach he or she deems favorable at the time. Scholars favoring the eclectic approach include Grant Osborne and Greg Beale.

historical roots of dispensationalism’s vigor towards literal hermeneutics, clarifies that its hermeneutical approach is not something to be feared:

Dispensational theology employs no unique or cultic hermeneutic; its hermeneutic is the historic Protestant hermeneutic. But it does attempt to apply this method more consistently to Old Testament predictive prophecy than the Reformers or the denominational traditions coming from them were willing to do.<sup>36</sup>

It is this aspect of employing a literal rendering of Scripture to all its components consistently, including prophecy, which makes Dispensational Premillennialism distinct in its eschatological theology. As Geisler notes, “The issue, then, boils down to *the understanding and/or application* (rather than the name) of the method of interpreting (hermeneutics) [emphasis in original]”<sup>37</sup> In this vein, it is helpful at this point to specify the method dispensationalists employ that in turn results in their unique eschatology. Here, Charles Ryrie is lucid in correctly assessing five key components of Dispensational-Premillennialism:

(1) *The hermeneutical principle of literal interpretation*, which leads to a belief in (2) *the literal fulfillment of Old Testament prophecies*, which in turn cause one to recognize (3) *a clear distinction between Israel and the church*, out of which the concept of (4) *the pretribulational rapture of the church grows*, and the belief in (5) *a literal, earthly millennial kingdom* during which the covenant promises to Israel will be fulfilled [emphasis in original].<sup>38</sup>

Particularly, points four and five above are reached by a consistent hermeneutical approach to key eschatological texts found in places like the “seventy weeks” of Daniel (9:24-27), along with texts found in NT passages: Matt 24-25; John 14; 1 Thess 4; 2 Thess 2; 1 Cor 15; and Rev 3, and 20. Adding to the weight of Dispensational-Premillennialism is the telling fact that the book of Revelation has a complete absence of any mention of the Church from chapters 4 to 22—the block of chapters detailing the horrific events of the Tribulation on earth. Additionally, the NT emphasis on the expectancy of Christ’s return,<sup>39</sup> as well as the Restrainer (2 Thess 2:6-7) being removed before the tribulation starts,<sup>40</sup> all cumulatively point to a pre-

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<sup>36</sup> Dale S. DeWitt, *Dispensational Theology in America During The 20<sup>th</sup> Century* (Grand Rapids: Grace Bible College, 2002), 8.

<sup>37</sup> Norman Geisler, *Systematic Theology* (Minneapolis, MN: Bethany House, 2005), 4:414.

<sup>38</sup> This quote is a summation of Ryrie given by Larry V. Crutchfield, “The Early Church Fathers and Foundations of Dispensationalism,” in *An Introduction to Classical Evangelical Hermeneutics* ed. by Mal Couch 87–94 (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, 2000), 88. For Ryrie’s original outline, see Charles C. Ryrie, *Dispensationalism*, revised and expanded (Chicago, IL: Moody, 1995), 146–49.

<sup>39</sup> This expectancy is also called the doctrine of imminence, taken from places such as John 14:2-3; Acts 1:11; 1 Cor 15:51-52; Phil 3:20; Col 3:4; 1 Thess 1:10; 1 Tim 6:14; James 5:8; 1 Peter 3:3-4.

<sup>40</sup> That the “Restrainer” in 2 Thess 2:6-7 is the Holy Spirit indwelt Church, and not human government or law, makes the most sense grammatically and logically. In v.6, τὸ κατέχον (that [which] is restraining), is in the

tribulational, pre-millennial rapture of the Church. Commenting on both the doctrine of Christ's imminent return and the Holy Spirit's work of restraint of the Antichrist, Pentecost states:

To the church, no signs were given, The church was told to live in the light of the imminent coming of the Lord to translate them in His presence...As long as the Holy Spirit is resident within the church which is His temple, the restraining work will continue....It is only when the church, the temple, is removed that this restraining ministry ceases and lawlessness can produce the lawless one.<sup>41</sup>

Not only does a consistent plain reading of Scripture reveal a pretribulational rapture, but it also solidifies the coming Kingdom as a literal, thousand year period. Indeed, as McClain affirms, "Here the Kingdom of God appears as a government of God to be establishment on earth at the second coming of Christ, who will reign with His risen and glorified saints over the nations in a literal kingdom for a 'thousand years.'"<sup>42</sup> A consistent, grammatical hermeneutic simply will not allow for any other interpretation. Concerning this fact, Moulton has provided three grammatical details which cannot be overlooked when interpreting Revelation chapter 20, and provide an air-tight case as to why Kingdom must be literal:

First: The statement of the thousand (χιλιάς) is used six times in the text (20:1-7). The use of *literary repetition* adds emphasis to this specific and crucial time period. Second: The use of the *definite article* accompanies statements regarding this thousand Year period [vv.3, 5, 7]. The article emphasizes that this time period is a known unit, removing any reason to interpret the thousand in a manner other than literal. Third: The author uses both a specific time word (the thousand) and a non-specific time word (for a short time, 20:3) in the same context. This strongly argues for a literal interpretation for the 'thousand years,' since this author could well have used the expression 'a long time' in place of the 'thousand' if in fact he did not truly mean a literal 'thousand.'<sup>43</sup>

It is worth noting that it is only Dispensational Premillennialism that treats the biblical data concerning the future Kingdom comprehensively. This is due to the system's recognition of the covenants given to Israel, such as the Abrahamic (Gen 15), the Davidic (2 Sam 7; cf. Psalm 89),

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neuter and likely refers to the Church, while v.7, ὁ κατέχων (one restraining, or the restrainer), is in the masculine gender pointing to an active personal Agent supplying the Church with the restraining power. Taken together with texts such as 1 Cor 3:16 and 6:19, this restraining Agent is best identified as the Holy Spirit who presently indwells Christians individually and the Church corporately. It therefore seems logical that it is only when every Christian is removed from earth that the careers of the Antichrist and False Prophet are possible as all godly influence, wisdom, and restraint on the planet will be gone and thus leave a horrific vacuum of leadership to be filled. That said, for an alternate, noteworthy view that understands God the Father as the Restrainer and his providential care as that which restrains the present evil, see Issa E. Haddad, "The Identity of the 'Restrainer' in 2 Thessalonians 2:6-7" (master's thesis, Southern California Seminary, 2009).

<sup>41</sup> J. Dwight Pentecost, *Things to Come*, 203-205.

<sup>42</sup> Alva J. McClain, *The Greatness of the Kingdom* (Winona Lake, IN: BMH, 1959), 8.

<sup>43</sup> Brian Moulton, "The Brief Case for a Literal Millennium," (course notes, *Analysis of Daniel*, Southern California Seminary, El Cajon, CA, 2010). Emphasis in original.

and the New Covenant (Jer 31), all finding their fulfillment in the Millennial Kingdom. In contrast, non-dispensational systems simply have no real use for the promised Kingdom as they fail to recognize a distinct, literal fulfillment of these promises given to national Israel.

For example, Historic-Premillennialist, Millard Erickson, clearly admits, “There is in posttribulationism relatively little theological rationale for the millennium. It seems to be somewhat superfluous.”<sup>44</sup> Likewise, even Ladd admits: “Here we are shut up to inferences, for the New Testament nowhere explains the need for this temporal kingdom, except to indicate that in some undisclosed way it is essential to the accomplishment of the reign of Christ (1 Cor 15:24ff).”<sup>45</sup> As both of these scholars have revealed, without a belief in the literal future fulfillment of the covenants given specifically to Israel—a *belief that is birthed out of a consistent application of the literal, grammatical hermeneutic*—there is simply no use for a literal Millennial Kingdom. Highlighting this fact, Michael Wiley boils down the Millennial Kingdom to two distinct purposes, with Dispensational-Premillennialism being the only end-times view that embraces both. Wiley states:

Consequently, there are two main propositions that can be concluded regarding the purpose of the millennial kingdom: (1) the Kingdom is set apart for the purpose of Christ to defeat his enemies once and for all (1 Cor 15:24-25); and, (2) the Kingdom is set apart for the purpose of the unconditional covenants to be fulfilled. If both propositions are disregarded, one will logically adopt either an amillennial or postmillennial view. If just the first proposition is accepted, but the second is denied, then one will logically espouse a non-dispensational premillennial view. However, if both propositions are claimed, then it seems apparent that one will logically come into full agreement with dispensational premillennialism.<sup>46</sup>

It is because of the non-dispensationalists’ blurring, or destroying, any distinction between the Church and national Israel, they simply see no unique purpose of the MK other than to propose Christ does *something* during that time. Additionally, this author suggests it is the subtle, yet heavily entrenched supersessionism that keeps the non-dispensationalist from embracing a pre-tribulation rapture of the Church. As non-dispensational (historic) premillennialist, Wayne Grudem, realized:

It must be said that behind this argument of pretribulationists is probably a more fundamental concern: the desire to preserve a distinction between *the church* (which they think will be taken to heaven to be with Christ) and *Israel* (which they think will

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<sup>44</sup> Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology* 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2007), 1231. A post-tribulation rapture is the common eschatological view within Covenant or Historic Premillennialism (of which Erickson subscribes), as opposed to Dispensational Premillennialism which alone sees a pre-tribulation rapture of the Church.

<sup>45</sup> George Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament*, 629. It is specifically here, concerning the literalness of Millennial Kingdom, where Ladd distances himself from Dispensational Premillennialism while still holding to some (undefined) future aspect to the Kingdom.

<sup>46</sup> John Michael Wiley, “Comparisons and Contrasts Between the Millennial Kingdom and the New Heavens and New Earth” *Journal of Dispensational Theology* Vol. 19 No. 58 (Winter, 2015): 276.

constitute the people of God on earth during the tribulation and then during the millennial kingdom).<sup>47</sup>

While Grudem correctly assessed the dispensationalist's instance on the distinction between the Church and national Israel, he does not go back far enough in addressing the real underlying concern. In actuality, the dispensationalist's desire to preserve a distinction between the Church and Israel is born out of the previous desire—to read Scripture in a manner *accurately* by taking the Word of God *consistently* at face value.

It all boils down to hermeneutics, and for the dispensational-premillennialist, consistent literal hermeneutics really is the key factor at play in all doctrine. Therefore, the dispensational-premillennialist's desire to preserve a distinction between Israel and the Church has no other motivation than to remain true to the Word of God (2 Tim 2:15). For this reason, the only legitimate eschatological conclusion resulting from a consistent application of the literal, grammatical hermeneutic, is the specific futurism encased in Dispensational-Premillennialism.

#### IV. A PLEA FOR CONSISTENT GRAMMATICAL- HISTORICAL INTERPRETATION

As demonstrated throughout, the only proper Biblical hermeneutic—one that does the most honor to Scripture—is a consistently literal, plain interpretation or what is called the “grammatical-historical hermeneutic.” Defending the importance of this hermeneutical methodology, Cone is emphatic:

An examination of the various methods of interpretation demonstrates that the only method which consistently recognizes this foundational truth [viz. a consistently practiced literal hermeneutic] is the literal grammatical historical approach, and thus not only is necessary, but by virtue of its necessity (for one) it is certainly possible.<sup>48</sup>

This literal way of interpreting Scripture was the accepted hermeneutic of the Antiochene school of interpretation in the early centuries of the church,<sup>49</sup> but goes back even further to the

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<sup>47</sup> Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Grand Rapids, MI: 1995), 1133.

<sup>48</sup> Christopher Cone, *Prolegomena on Biblical Hermeneutics and Method* 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Hurst, TX: Tyndale Seminary Press, 2012), 155.

<sup>49</sup> Among whom the most prominent were: Lucian (A.D. 240– 312); Diodorus (d. 393); John Chrysostom (A.D. 354–407); and Theodoret (A.D. 386 –458). Cf. Bruce M. Metzger, *The Text of the New Testament: Its Transmission, Corruption, and Restoration* 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1992), 141-142. Additionally, see Roy B. Zuck, *Basic Bible Interpretation: A Practical Guide to Discovering Biblical Truth* (Colorado Springs, CO: David C. Cook, 1991), 37-38.

apostle Paul (cf. 1 Cor 15:27) and the scribe Ezra (Neh 8:8). Thus, the plain, or literal grammatical-historical hermeneutic finds biblical support in both Old and New Testaments.<sup>50</sup>

The key to the grammatical-historical method of hermeneutics is interpreting Scripture in light of its immediate context (grammatical and historical, which includes biblical, cultural, political, etc) in order to exegete the *author's single intended meaning*. When applied consistently, this method helps the interpreter recognize not only Scripture's various genres, but also how to decipher the author's point within those genres if he moves from the literal to the figurative—such as John's use of the comparative particles ὡς (like, as, as it were) and ὅμοιος (similar to, resembling) used well over 90 times in Revelation alone;<sup>51</sup> similarly, Ezekiel's frequent use of the comparative noun תְּמִינָה (likeness, something-like) and attached preposition כִּי (like, as, according to) when attempting to describe something that is beyond words.<sup>52</sup> The governing desire of this hermeneutical approach—to draw out the *authorial-intent* of the biblical writer—is what sets the literal method apart from its allegorical rivals.

It is this consistent hermeneutic alone that has as its main goal to draw out the author's intended meaning through diligent exegesis—whatever the genre may be. Robert Thomas, a known champion of the grammatical-historical hermeneutic offers sound advice for the reader of God's Word: “Interpret each statement in light of the principles of grammar and facts of history. Take each statement in its plain sense if it matched common sense, and do not look for another sense.”<sup>53</sup> This is, after all, the way we interpret writings today such as newspapers, personal letters, tax documents, medical records, etc. Whatever the original author meant to say *then* (by his use of semantics and syntax), is what he means to say *now*. While applications of the text can

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<sup>50</sup> Other specific textual indicators supporting a consistently literal hermeneutic within Scripture are the following: the origin of communicated speech in Gen 1 and 2—God created human language and spoke to Adam in literal fashion an expected Adam to understand/obey, while Satan introduces the first non-literal interpretation (Gen 3:1). Prophecies literally fulfilled, e.g., future leaders like Cyrus King of Persia, or the gathering and dispersing and re-gathering the nation Israel, as well as the 300 + prophecies about the Messiah literally fulfilled in Christ. Specific Scriptures: 1 Cor 14:33: “God is not a God of confusion,” (immediate context has to do with languages and understanding revelation in the church); Neh 8—Ezra reads from Law all day to the people in plain language as its written so they understand; 1 Cor 15:27—Paul is describing the prophetic order of end times events (prophecy!) and he uses the adjective δῆλον (meaning clear, plain, evident, cf. BDAG, “δῆλος”) to get his point across that he is discussing prophecy *literally* and expecting the Corinthians to understand it *literally*; Acts 26:14—Paul retells his conversion story to Agrippa and it is only in this account where he specifies the voice from Heaven as speaking to him was in a clear, literal local human dialect (Aramaic, or “the Hebrew language”): “Saul, Saul why are you persecuting Me?” Finally: Jesus' words to His disciples—Follow Me!—were understood literally obeyed literally (e.g., Matt 4:19-20, 9:9). Additionally, His miracles lose all meaning if they are not reported with a literal intended meaning as they served as literal signs for belief (Isa 35:5; John 20:30-31).

<sup>51</sup> It is also worth mentioning John's use of the adverb πνευματικῶς (spiritually, symbolically) in Rev 11:8 when describing the future apostate Jerusalem as “Sodom and Egypt.” Thus, along with his constant use of ὡς (like, as it were) and ὅμοιος (similar to, resembling), as well as the verb ἐσήμανεν (He signified) initiating the Apocalypse in 1:1 (cf. 12:1, σημεῖον, sign), John employs these textual markers in order to make plain for his readers when a literal truth *within* a specific figure of speech is intended. Indeed, John's use of the 2<sup>nd</sup> aorist verb εἶδες (you have seen), from the root οἶδα (I know) to initiate the verb sequence in Rev 1:19 strongly suggests John's mental grasp of truth while physically observing its figure or vision. cf. BDAG, 5205.4.

<sup>52</sup> E.g., Ezek 1:5: “And from the midst of it came the *likeness* [תְּמִינָה] of four living creatures. And this was their appearance: they had a human *likeness* [תְּמִינָה].” (ESV, emphasis added).

<sup>53</sup> Robert L Thomas, *Evangelical Hermeneutics*, 155.

be multiple, the author's original intended meaning is never discarded, overruled, abrogated, or changed.<sup>54</sup>

Therefore, the interpreter of Scripture, following the biblical method of consistent historical-grammatical hermeneutics, will choose to analyze the text according to the following guidelines offered by McLean: "When the plain sense of Scripture makes common sense, seek no other sense; therefore, take every word at its primary, ordinary, usual, literal, literary meaning unless the immediate context clearly indicated otherwise."<sup>55</sup> Indeed, this writer suggests it is imperative that those filling leadership roles in churches, Bible colleges, and seminaries teach the consistently literal, grammatical-historical method of Scripture interpretation in order for Christians to literally understand and literally obey God's truth (Psalm 119:160; John 17:17).

## V. CONCLUSION

With a view to analyzing the different hermeneutical approaches to the Kingdom of God in Revelation 20 against the back drop of Dispensationalism's literal approach, the legitimacy of the consistent application of the literal, grammatical-historical hermeneutic has been demonstrated throughout. Any abandonment of the literal interpretation of Scripture results in placing the interpreter as the arbiter over Scripture, rather than submitting to Scripture and drawing out the author's intended meaning. When this error is committed, various untenable conclusions arise in regards to the book of Revelation and the future Kingdom in particular. However, when the literal hermeneutic is *consistently* applied, the only legitimate result is the Premillennial-Dispensational understanding of eschatology to include its instance on the future, literal thousand year Kingdom of Revelation 20.

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<sup>54</sup> Although the NT can later expand on an OT text, that is build upon it and apply it in unexpected ways (e.g., Hos 11:1 = Matt 2:15), it never cancels out the original meaning found in the OT. The OT can stand on its own merit. Because of this, all four unilateral covenants given to Israel throughout the OT (Abrahamic, Land, Davidic and New Covenants) will be fulfilled in literal Israel during the Millennial Kingdom at Israel's national repentance and restoration (Zech 12:10; 14:4; cf. Acts 1:3, 6).

<sup>55</sup> John A. McLean, "The Importance of Hermeneutics," in *The Fundamentals of the Twenty-First Century*, ed. by Mal Couch (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, 2000), 78.