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WHAT I MEAN BY HISTORICAL-GRAMMATICAL EXEGESIS— WHY I AM NOT A LITERALIST

TREMPER LONGMAN III

I would like to thank the Dispensational Study Group for their invitation to come and address it on the subject of historical-grammatical exegesis.[1] I especially would like to express my appreciation for the work of Elliott Johnson with whom I will be interacting, particularly for his new book *Expository Hermeneutics*[2] which I read in preparation for today's lecture.

To begin, I would like to expose my shortcomings in relationship to the topic I have been asked to address. I probably should have confessed them to Craig Blaising when he invited me to participate in the conference, but Vern Poythress had such a positive and enjoyable experience here last year that I could not resist the temptation.[3]

My confession is that I have a second-hand understanding of dispensationalism. Virtually all my colleagues at some point in their lives were dispensationalists, most notably Bruce Waltke. I have never been a dispensationalist, not even becoming aware of dispensationalism until seminary. Since I went to Westminster Theological Seminary you can imagine that I did not get an extremely positive assessment of it. Nonetheless, Clair Davis, our church historian, was always fond of saying that Dallas Theological Seminary was the closest seminary to us in many ways.

However, before I had heard the term "dispensationalism," I had read Hal Lindsey's *The Late, Great Planet Earth*[4] in high school and had been deeply affected by it. I must admit that I now find significant hermeneutical problems with the book and certainly many of you do as well, but the book brought me face to face with apocalyptic literature in a way which started my inquiry into the claims of Christ. Lindsey

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[1]Since this article derives from an originally oral presentation, the style is casual and more personal.

[2]E. E. Johnson, *Expository Hermeneutics: An Introduction* (Zondervan, 1990).

[3]See the papers from this conference in the *Grace Theological Journal* 10 (1989).

[4]H. Lindsey, *The Late, Great Planet Earth* (Zondervan, 1970).

focused on apocalyptic in the Bible, and apocalyptic is meant to comfort oppressed believers with the thought of the judgment of the unbelieving oppressors. At the time that I read his book and was confronted by the vision of God's judgment, I knew that I was in the latter category.

I am dwelling on my distant relationship with dispensationalism because I have always been extremely uneasy to define and critique it as a system. I never felt that I really understood it. Now that I have read more extensively in the literature, I feel even more fearful to generalize about dispensationalism. There is a wide scope among you, and I get the feeling that there is some uncertainty and disagreement among dispensationalists about what defines dispensationalism.[5] This ambiguity will most clearly affect the second part of my paper when I define and critique a "literal approach" to interpretation. If I create straw dogs, it is due to my ignorance not my malice.

My other confession is that, while dispensationalism focuses on eschatological issues and Revelation 20,[6] I have very little interest in the debate. I have a great interest in the second coming obviously, but little interest in the issues surrounding millennial schemes (a-, post-, and pre-). I have sympathy for Berkhouer on this point when he suggests that we are asking the wrong question of the text.[7] The Bible exhorts us to be ready for Christ to return at any moment. That is the attitude I try to inculcate in myself, unfortunately with great shortcomings.

My assignment is to describe what I mean by "historical-grammatical exegesis" and secondly how that differs from literal interpretation.

HISTORICAL-GRAMMATICAL EXEGESIS

I would like to start with a statement concerning the goal of exegesis before moving on to the method which I employ to achieve that goal. When I interpret a text of Scripture, my goal is to understand the passage or book in its Old Testament context and from that understanding to bridge the gap to my situation today.[8] In my mind,

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[5]For a recent statement of dispensationalist and literalist hermeneutics, see selected articles in J. S. Feinberg (ed.), *Continuity and Discontinuity: Perspectives on the Relationship Between the Old and New Testaments* (Crossway Books, 1988).

[6]See J. F. Walvoord's remark that "the passage remains a bulwark of premillennial interpretation" in "The Theological Significance in Revelation 20:1-6," in *Essays in Honor of J. Dwight Pentecost* (ed. by S. D. Toussaint and C. H. Dyer; Moody, 1986) 237-38.

[7]G. C. Berkhouer, *The Return of Christ* (Eerdmans, 1972).

[8]A. C. Thiselton, *The Two Horizons: New Testament Hermeneutics and Philosophical Description* (Eerdmans, 1980).

exegesis always includes application,[9] but we can still unpack the goal of exegesis under two subheadings which are divided for the purpose of discussion: that is, the text's impact on the original recipients and then its application to us today.

HEARING THE OLD TESTAMENT AS THE ORIGINAL AUDIENCE

Distanciation

Divine revelation was addressed primarily to its first audience using the language, literary forms and conventions, metaphors, and genres which were familiar to that audience's culture. Thus, it is necessary for us as twentieth century Western Christians to first of all distance ourselves from our contemporary vantage point. In regard to the Old Testament, I conceptualize this distance on a number of levels including:

1. Time: the Old Testament was written thousands of years ago. Since many of us grew up with the Bible, we forget this simple, yet significant fact, even if we are scholars.

2. Culture: the Old Testament originated in an ancient Near Eastern, not a Western culture. Thus, we must do our best to distance ourselves from our own culture and place ourselves in ancient culture. Cultural distanciation is, of course, impossible to do totally. We are enmeshed in our culture and can never completely get out of it. Furthermore, there is much that we don't known about ancient culture. Thus, we are unable fully to reconstruct the ancient world in our imaginations.

This cultural distance has a tremendous impact on the task of exegesis. One brief illustration must suffice. Among other passages, Psalm 23 presents a picture image of God as a shepherd. If the interpreter of this psalm should stay in the twentieth century to understand this metaphor, he or she would seriously distort the meaning of the passage. Ancient sources must be consulted as available to arrive at a proper interpretation. Such a study of the shepherd image in ancient literature would lead to the discovery that the image has royal overtones. The ancient Mesopotamian king was known as the shepherd of his people. Below we will discuss the role of ancient Near Eastern materials in the interpretive task.

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[9]Or as J. M. Frame would have it there is no distinction between meaning and application, *The Doctrine of the Knowledge of God* (Presbyterian and Reformed, 1987) 83–84, 97–98, 140.

3. Redemptive-history: we live in the period of time after Jesus Christ
   has come to earth and performed his great redemptive acts. The Old
   Testament anticipates his coming in ways which we will discuss
   later, but nonetheless, we as Christians are distanced from the Old
   Testament due to our more intimate knowledge of Jesus Christ. For
   example, the sacrificial system does not have the same impact on us
   today as it did to its original audience in the wilderness.

Authorial Intention

By distancing ourselves from twentieth-century Western Chris-
tianity, we seek to understand the author's intention in the text of
Scripture which we are reading.

By making the author's intention the goal of our interpretation
raises a number of very thorny theoretical issues in the light of con-
temporary literary theory.[10] However, I believe it is proper and pos-
sible, indeed necessary, to speak of the author's intention as long as we
keep in mind three important points. First of all, our only access to an
author is through his text. Even if we had access to the author in an
extra-textual way (for instance, by means of personal interview), it still
would not be legitimate to use that source in a privileged way. That is,
if we asked an author what he meant by a certain passage and he
responded, he could be wrong in a number of ways, for instance by
changing his mind, distorting his words or (the one that I feel the most
as an author) forgetting what he was trying to say! We can only get to
the author's intention through the text, thus on a very practical level
we will have a text-oriented exegesis.

This leads to my second point. When we arrive at an interpreta-
tion and attribute it to the author's intention, we have constructed a
hypothesis, no more and no less. Thus, I feel comfortable with more
nuanced statements of authorial intention than those provided by
Hirsch,[11] a writer popular with some evangelical hermeneuts.[12] For
instance, I gravitate to statements such as those provided by G. Strick-
land, who considers himself a disciple of Hirsch. In his *Structuralism
or Criticism?* he cogently argues that "all that we say or think about a
particular utterance or piece of writing presupposes an assumption on
our part, correct or otherwise, concerning the intention of the speaker
or writer."[13] Thus, one partial way of stating the goal of historical-

[10]T. Longman III, *Literary Approaches to Biblical Interpretation* (Zondervan,
1987) 63–71.

[11]E. D. Hirsch, Jr., *Validity in Interpretation* (New Haven: Yale University Press,
1967), and *The Aims of Interpretation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976).

[12]W. Kaiser, *Toward an Exegetical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1981), and
E. E. Johnson, *Expository Hermeneutics*.

[13]G. Strickland, *Structuralism or Criticism? Thoughts on How We Read* (Cam-
bridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981) 36.

grammatical approach is to say that it is to recover the intention of the author of the passage. We have seen how this leads to a primarily text-oriented method.

However there is a third and even more difficult issue in making authorial intention the goal of exegesis and that is the nature of the author in the biblical text.[14] The relationship between the author and the Author is a problem unique to biblical hermeneutics. When we talk about the intention of the author, what are we saying of the relationship between the divine and human authors? Are we asking after the human author's intention assuming that it is co-extensive with the divine author's? 1 Pet 1:10–12 and the interpretation of Old Testament passages in the New Testament led me to say no. However, do we then bypass the human author? No. The fact that the divine Author stands behind all of Scripture (written by an unknown number of human authors) in the final analysis gives us confidence to treat the Bible as an organic unity. It allows us to perform canonical exegesis which is based on the principle of the analogy of Scripture (more later).

Genre

In a text-oriented approach to authorial intention genre assumes an important, even critical place. Hirsch points this out in his discussion of intrinsic genres.[15] This is because authors evoke reading strategies in their audience by utilizing certain generic forms. In other words, authors send signals to their readers as to "how to take" their statements.[16]

Genres are not forms which have dropped from heaven; they are cultural conventions which writers consciously or unconsciously exploit based on their own previous reading experience. In my "spare time" I've been writing a historical fiction based in the neo-Babylonian period. In the process I'm learning about literature. While I've been sketching out the settings, plots and character I've also been reading a lot of other historical fictions (*Ancient Evenings*; *Name of the Rose*; *The First Man in Rome*; *The Persian Boy*; *Pillars of Fire*)[17] to get a feel for the genre. I don't feel totally restricted by what I read, but I do feel guided by them because authors learn what their audience expects. If they have a message to communicate or a story to tell, they want to do so in a form which is recognizable by their readers. In major part, this

[14]V. Poythress, "Divine Meaning in Scripture," *WTJ* 48 (1986) 241–77.

[15]Hirsch, *Validity*.

[16]T. Longman III, "Form Criticism, Recent Developments in Genre Theory and the Evangelical," *WTJ* 47 (1985) 46–67.

[17]N. Mailer, *Ancient Evenings* (Little, Brown, 1983); C. McCullough, *The First Man in Rome* (Morrow, 1990); M. Renault, *The Persian Boy* (Vintage Books, 1972); K. Follett, *The Pillars of the Earth* (Signet, 1990).

recognizable form is genre. Genre, as its very name implies is a generalization, an abstraction, within which variation does occur.

Thus, as I am engaged in an historical-grammatical study of a passage or book of Scripture I am concerned to identify the text's genre as early as possible. Of course, as genre theorists are quick to point out, this may only be done during the reading process, so a number of other things which we commonly associate with serious exegesis are also taking place at this time, for instance text criticism and word studies based on the most current linguistic insights such as those provided by Moises Silva in his book *Words and Their Meaning* and also his *God, Language, and Scripture.*[18]

Indeed a generic analysis of a biblical passage is done very much in a give and take with the biblical text. We must be careful not to impose a generic identification based on our theological prejudices, though on the other hand tradition can guide us and we should only depart from it with very strong evidence.

The Song of Songs is an excellent example from church history of how a community-wide shift in genre identification actually persuaded the vast majority of the church.[19] Most people today identify the Song as some sort of love poetry. It may be a drama[20] or, I think better, a love psalter,[21] but most today take it as love poetry. When the average Christian with some typical church instruction picks up the Song, he or she often expects to learn about the intimacy of human love.[22] If such a thought became public in Victorian England, such a person would get hard looks, in Calvin's Geneva, would have been exiled and worse in Inquisition Spain.[23] The well-known shift in genre identification came about for two reasons: the bankruptcy of allegorical interpretation and more immediately the discovery of love poems in Arabia, from ancient Egypt[24] and Mesopotamia.[25]

Now much more could be said about genre, but allow me a couple of further comments in order to anticipate objections. The first problem arises because the importance of genre identification in biblical studies initially assumed notoriety with the rise of form criticism.[26]

[18]M. Silva, *Biblical Words and Their Meaning* (Zondervan, 1983), and *God, Language and Scripture* (Zondervan, 1990).

[19]M. Pope, *Song of Songs* (AB; Doubleday, 1977) 34–229.

[20]C. Seerveld, *The Greatest Song* (Trinity Pennyasheet Press, 1967).

[21]M. Falk, *Love Lyrics from the Bible* (Almond, 1982).

[22]S. C. Glickman, *A Song for Lovers* (IVP, 1976).

[23]Pope, *Song*, 89–229.

[24]J. White, *A Study of the Language of Love in the Song of Songs and Egyptian Love Poetry* (Scholars, 1978).

[25]J. Westenholz, "Help for Rejected Suitors: The Old Akkadian Love Incantation MAD V 8," *Or* 46 (1977) 198–219.

[26]A good primer on form criticism is J. H. Hayes (ed.), *Old Testament Form Criticism* (Trinity University Press, 1977).

Thus, people like myself who have pushed the importance of genre analysis have occasionally been accused of being closet form critics. Indeed one person wrote an article reviewing my work entitled "Form Criticism or the Reformed Faith?"[27] making an alternative for the reader between my approach and Reformed theology. My approach to genre is synchronic not diachronic, it is descriptive, not prescriptive.[28]

The second issue is related to the first and that is the fact that faulty genre analyses seriously distort biblical interpretation. To identify Genesis 1 as "myth" or Genesis 32 as "Sage" or the book of Daniel as "pseudonymous writing" seriously affects our biblical interpretation.

While these are legitimate concerns, we must not throw out the baby with the bath water. The truth of the matter is, we can't read anything without making a genre identification. In our everyday reading of newspapers, novels, textbooks, short stories and countless other types of literature, this identification may be either conscious or unconscious. However, it is important that we as biblical scholars work consciously with our subject material. This is especially important that we do so because we are often distanced from the ancient genres of the Bible. This fact leads me to my next general topic: the comparative approach.

Comparative Studies

While engaged in a historical-grammatical study, I am thus interested in the message which the author intended to communicate to his audience. In the first place the message is directed toward the original audience which was contemporary with the author. Thus, it is incumbent upon me as a twentieth-century Christian to put myself back into the position of the original audience. This is the distanciation to which I referred in the first part of the paper. How do we do that? How do we recreate the mindset of the original audience?

We begin on the basis of the analogy of Scripture. We immerse ourselves in the Bible and its worldview. We use the clearer parts of the Bible to help us understand the more difficult parts.

But today we can go further. Thanks to the discoveries of the past century and a half in particular we have more material now than ever before in the history of exegesis to help us recover the cultural milieu of the biblical world.

Now I am aware of the debate and of the problems here.[29] In the first place there is anything but cultural continuity between ancient

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[27]H. P. Smith, "Form Criticism and Reformed Theology," *The Trinity Review* 58 (1987) 1-3.

[28]T. Longman, "Form Criticism."

[29]See chap. 2 in T. Longman III, *Fictional Akkadian Autobiography* (Eisenbrauns, 1991).

Israel and the surrounding nations. On one level there is absolute contrast—true religion versus idolatry. Israel was called upon to abhor the religious systems of ancient Mesopotamia, Egypt, and Canaan.

However on another level there is cultural continuity which can be exploited toward the recovery of the mindset and perceptions of the original recipients of divine revelation and this in a number of different areas.

On the simplest level, consider the language of the Old Testament. There is linguistic continuity between Hebrew on the one hand and, in a descending level of similarity, Ugaritic, Eblaite, Northwest Semitic, Akkadian, and Arabic.

Unless trained as an Old Testament scholar, people don't realize how much our English Translations depend on the comparative method. One small, but well-known, example is the light that the materials from Ugarit and Nuzi threw on the meaning of the word "judge" (*šôpēṭ*). It had long been considered an anomaly that the Judges did very little judging in the legal sense. It thus struck a chord when the Ugarit and Nuzi cognate indicated that the word could have a more general meaning of "to rule."

Hebrew lexicography has always been highly dependent on the comparative method, before the nineteenth century the only difference was that our resources were limited to Midrashic Hebrew, Aramaic, and Arabic.[30]

The relationship between Hebrew and the other Semitic languages is paradigmatic to the other levels of the comparative approach as well. For instance, it is not at all surprising that there is continuity between a general Semitic poetics and biblical poetics. We are helped in our study of parallelism, acrostics and other poetic devices by recourse to Ugaritic and Akkadian poetry. W. G. E. Watson's study illustrates the point beautifully.[31]

However, it appears that as we move to other more substantive levels of comparative analysis, some evangelicals begin to balk. It is all right to speak of language and parallelism having light to throw on the Bible but what of metaphors and images for God? Without developing it here, there is an important relationship, in the final analysis a polemical one, between the image of Yahweh as the divine warrior who rides a storm cloud into battle and Baal who is also pictured in the Ugaritic materials as a cloud rider.[32]

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[30]P. Fronzaroli (ed.), *Studies on Semitic Lexicography* (Universita di Firenze, 1973).

[31]W. G. E. Watson, *Classical Hebrew Poetry* (Sheffield, 1984).

[32]T. Longman III, "The Divine Warrior: The New Testament Use of an Old Testament Motif," *WTJ* 44 (1982) 290–307, and S. Kang, *Divine War in the Old Testament and the Ancient Near East* (De Gruyter, 1989).

For the purpose of this paper, however, I would prefer to settle for a moment on the question of comparative genre, since this is an area in which Professor Johnson has criticized my work in his book *Expository Hermeneutics*.[33] It is true that Professor Johnson does not reject the use of comparative studies in genre analysis in principle because elsewhere he rightfully accepts such studies as those of Mendenhall and Kline which suggest that certain covenant passages bear a close relationship with Near Eastern treaties.[34] I simply submit that my study of Ecclesiastes shows a similar type of generic relationship with the genre of didactic autobiography.[35] Reading between the lines, I wonder whether Johnson and others are concerned about this genre identification because of the implications it has for the supposed Solomonic authorship of the book. However, it does not take the Akkadian genre to argue for this, the text itself gives us signals that Qohelet is not Solomon, as scholars like Martin Luther, Moses Stuart, Hengstenberg, Delitisch, E. J. Young, and D. Kidner have pointed out, and in any case Qohelet himself is not presented as the author of the book, but rather the second wise man who speaks to his son in the all-important epilogue.[36]

But I shouldn't lose sight of the forest for the trees. My point is that comparative studies are an integral part of my practice of the historical-grammatical approach because it helps us recover the perspective of the original audience.

Furthermore, I believe that the comparative approach enables us not only to rediscover the meanings of words, the impact of poetic conventions, metaphors, and genres, but it also enlightens us to a major function of the biblical text in its original setting and that is its polemics against the surrounding religions which continually threatened Israel. Psalm 29 is a good example. This psalm, though probably not an originally Canaanite psalm as Cross[37] and others have argued,[38] does present a picture of God as the force behind the storm cloud. He is also pictured as the victor who is enthroned over the chaotic waters of the flood. Why has the biblical author presented us with this picture of Yahweh in colors very like Baal? For polemical purposes, the ancient reader of this psalm would come away with the

[33]E. E. Johnson, *Expository Hermeneutics*, 277ff.

[34]M. Kline, *Treaty of the Great King. The Covenant Structure of Deuteronomy* (Eerdmans, 1963), and G. E. Mendenhall, "Covenant Forms in Israelite Tradition," *BA* 17 (1954) 50–70.

[35]Longman, *Fictional Akkadian Autobiography*, 120–23.

[36]M. V. Fox, "Frame Narrative and Composition in the Book of Qohelet," *HUCA* 48 (1977) 83–106.

[37]F. M. Cross, *Canaanite Myth and Hebrew Epic* (Cambridge, 1973).

[38]C. Kloos, *Yhwh's Combat with the Sea* (Brill, 1986).

message "Yahweh, not Baal, is the power behind the storm, he is the one who brings order out of chaos!"[39]

LITERARY APPROACH

I would argue that the literary approach to biblical interpretation is also an aspect of the historical-grammatical approach to a biblical text.[40] We have already raised some issues related to a literary approach to the text as we were discussing issues surrounding the author as well as the concept of genre. Under this heading, however, I am interested in the conventions of the poets and storytellers of ancient Israel.[41] Knowledge of these conventions is a way of placing ourselves back into the time period of the original audience. As Robert Alter has taught us:

> every culture, even every era in a particular culture, develops distinctive and sometimes intricate codes for telling its stories, involving everything from narrative point of view, procedures of description and characterization, the management of dialogue, to the ordering of time and the organization of plot.[42]

The more we become aware of these conventions, the better we will understand the poems and stories of the Old and New Testaments. To take a single example, if Kugel[43] is right that the poets of the Old Testament wrote parallelism so that the second colon always sharpens, intensifies, seconds the first colon, then as readers we have improved on our reading under the old paradigm that the second colon merely repeats the same thought as the first colon only using different words.[44]

It is in this way that the literary approach is an aspect of the historical-grammatical approach. However, when the literary approach takes over the whole exegetical enterprise and denise the historical referentiality of the text we once again have an example of an excessive use of a method which results in a serious distortion of the text.

APPLICATION OF THE TEXT

As Christians, however, we may not stop with an analysis of how the first readers initially understood the text. This is especially true of the Old Testament. The historical-grammatical method insists on

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[39]T. Longman III, *How to Read the Psalms* (InterVarsity, 1988) 118-21.

[40]L. Ryken, *How to Read the Bible as Literature* (Zondervan, 1984) 12.

[41]Longman, *Literary Approaches.*

[42]R. Alter, "A Response to Critics," *JSOT* 27 (1983) 113-17.

[43]J. Kugel, *The Idea of Biblical Poetry* (Yale University Press, 1981).

[44]Longman, *How to Read*, 89-110.

understanding the passage in its ever-expanding context and that context now includes the New Testament. We are drawn to consider the Old Testament from the perspective of the New Testament[45] at the insistence of Jesus himself in Luke 24:27, 44.

Thus, in terms of the Old Testament we must look at it in the light of Christ. Otherwise we are no different from rabbis. The approach to the relationship between the Testaments that I find most helpful are studies of themes which reverberate throughout the Old and into the New Testaments. I am thinking of studies like Robertson[46] and McComiskey[47] on covenant, W. Kaiser on promise,[48] E. Martens on God's design,[49] M. Kline[50] on theophany and many, many others. This kind of study finds its stimulus in such works as G. Vos[51] and more recently but in basically the same vein, VanGemeren.[52]

Even further, however, as an interpreter I can never read the text in order to dissect it as a scientist. I cannot even pretend to read it objectively as if I have nothing to do with it. Indeed, I must subject myself to the text and constantly ask the question what is it calling on me to do. I consider this kind of application question to be integrally involved with all interpretation and my interpretation is incomplete without it. As a matter of fact, and I should have said this first and not last, an important component of the historical-grammatical approach is prayer. I need to ask the Spirit to allow me to see the truth which God is trying to communicate to me through the pages of his Holy Word, and without such spiritual illumination, I can hope for no success in really understanding his word. This, of course, is the burden of 1 Cor 2:10–15.

CONCLUSION

The above is what I mean by the historical-grammatical method. If there were time and interest I would describe the importance of establishing the text by means of a text critical analysis, the need for careful philological analysis based on a competence in ancient Near Eastern languages, the need for a sensitive study of the composition of the book and a kind of analysis which looks for its theological *Tendenz.*

[45]W. Kaiser, *Toward an Exegetical Theology* (Baker, 1981) 111.

[46]O. P. Robertson, *Christ of the Covenants* (Baker, 1980).

[47]T. McComiskey, *The Covenants of Promise* (Baker, 1985).

[48]W. Kaiser, *Toward an Old Testament Theology* (Zondervan, 1978).

[49]E. Martens, *God's Design* (Baker, 1981).

[50]M. Kline, *Kingdom Prologue* (privately published, n.d.).

[51]G. Vos, *Biblical Theology* (Eerdmans, 1948 [1975]).

[52]W. VanGemeren, *Progress of Redemption* (Zondervan, 1988).

What I have described is the need to found the goal of our interpretation in a bridging of the horizons, to use Thistleton's phrase.[53] The need to first of all ask after the impact of a passage in its original context. This includes a study of genre, a close reading based on a literary approach and often involves a comparative study. In the second place, it involves a biblical-theological analysis which asks how this passage anticipates Christ and then examines our own lives, our society, our church's situation in the light of the demands of the passage. All of this needs to be surrounded by prayer which submits ourselves before the Lord of the Word as we study his Word.

HOW THIS DIFFERS FROM A LITERAL APPROACH

I have been asked to contrast this approach with the so-called literal approach, presumably because a distinctive trait of dispensationalism is a literal approach to the text. However, I do not believe that my approach to the text differs from a literal approach when the term "literal" is properly understood. That is, the approach to interpretation which I presented above does not conflict with literal when understood as "the type of interpretation where one reads passages as organic wholes and tries to understand what each passage expresses against the background of the original human author and the original situation."[54] However, it does conflict with what Poythress calls "plain" or "flat" interpretation.[55] Plain or flat interpretation takes a passage at its most obvious meaning and is hesitant to move beyond that reading. My approach also differs with the so-called "literal" approach if the latter restricts itself just to the Old Testament setting and does not take seriously the fact that the New Testament is an organic development of the Old Testament with the result that it often throws light on an Old Testament text (see below).

When I think of literal approaches (in the negative sense of the term) to the text, I don't think of a method as much as a mindset. On one level the question is, what do we expect to encounter in the text?

I doubt that there is anyone in this room who denies the presence of figures of speech in the text. Indeed, that is a part of a literal approach to treat as metaphor what is metaphoric.

However, what I encounter in the writings of some scholars who advocate a literal approach is the view that the burden of proof is on the metaphor. In other words, a passage, phrase, word or concept is literal until proven guilty. To be fair I readily admit that this charge stems from a perception but I think one of the purposes of this session

[53]Thiselton, *The Two Horizons.*

[54]Johnson, *Expository Hermeneutics,* 84.

[55]V. Poythress, *Understanding Dispensationalists* (Zondervan, 1987) 78–86.

is to get perceptions out in the open. My impression is that a literal approach believes that a figure of speech is something which can't be processed literally. In other words, the first move is to take it literally. If that is impossible, then it is figurative.

Blaising, a dispensationist, faults the literal approach in this regard when he says:

> Another factor that perhaps has contributed to this fixed-interpretation view of dispensationalism has been the dispensational description of its literal hermeneutic as clear, plain, or normal interpretation. This can give the idea that all the hermeneutical results presented in dispensational expositions are the clear, plain, simple, obvious interpretations of Scripture. Any other exposition is unclear, convoluted, and abnormal.[56]

Over against this dispensationalist view of the text as plain and simple stands the highly subtle and sophisticated rhetorical strategies of the biblical text. The insights of the new literary approach to the Bible work against such an understanding of the text.[57] It has long been recognized that poetry, prophecy, and apocalyptic are rich in imagery and subtle literary devices, but now more than ever the highly structured and incredibly detailed literary artistry of prose has also been recognized. Just to name a few examples, we note the discovery of the chiastic arrangement of the flood narrative[58] and the incredibly detailed structure of the Babel story.[59] Alter[60] has described the function of type scenes and other prose conventions. Dillard[61] has shown the power of the Chronicler's use of analogy and modeling in his historical reporting.

Our attention will later be given to the other more nuanced genres like poetry, prophecy and apocalyptic, but it is still valuable to point out the fact that the literary approach uncovers and describes the incredible subtlety of the Bible as a whole.

Surprisingly the Bible's literary artistry does not deny the clarity of the central message of the Bible. The Bible is a marvelous book; it communicates the gospel clearly to the least educated, while at the same time those of us who have spent our life studying the Bible feel that we are just scratching the surface. We never feel like we can control the text.

[56]C. Blaising, "Development of Dispensationalism by Dispensationalists," *BibSac* 145 (1988) 257.

[57]Longman, *Literary Approaches.*

[58]G. J. Wenham, "The Coherence of the Flood Narrative," *VT* 28 (1978) 337ff.

[59]J. P. Fokkelman, *Narrative Art in Genesis* (Assen: van Gorcum, 1975).

[60]Alter, *The Art,* 47–62.

[61]R. B. Dillard, "The Literary Structure of the Chronicler's Solomon Narrative," *JSOT* 30 (1984) 85–93.

I must admit, though, that in reading some writers, and they are most often of the literal school, they communicate the impression that they can control the text. I believe that this is what Blaising is getting at when he criticizes the "fixed interpretation view of dispensationalism." I also suspect such a sentiment when scientific or legal analogies are to describe the hermeneutic certainty, a good example being Johnson.[62] Yes, I believe there are controls on interpretation (genre analysis is a good example), but not one which allows us to say that I have arrived at a definitive, exhaustive understanding of the text which we can then prove to everyone beyond a shadow of a doubt. The lack of such hermeneutical certainty invites us to be open to challenge in our exegetical conclusions.

While the entire Bible invites a literary approach and an expectation of sophisticated literary strategies, there is increased expectation of such in certain genres. In certain genres I not only expect discrete metaphors, but a metaphorical form of discourse. The poetic form of prophecy and especially apocalyptic point in that direction. Consider Num 12:6-8:

When a prophet of the Lord is among you,
   I reveal myself to him in visions,
   I speak to him in dreams.
But this is not true of my servant Moses;
   he is faithful in all my house,
With him I speak face to face.
   clearly and not in riddles;
   he sees the form of the Lord.
Why then were you not afraid to speak against my servant Moses?"

If nothing else, doesn't this lead us to expect what indeed we find in the main among the prophets and apocalyptic seers, namely difficult to interpret, highly metaphoric language? We do not encounter obvious and easy to understand language.

The poetic form of most prophecy and apocalyptic cuts down on precision, but then that is not the function of the text. As we read Ezekiel 40-48, we ask ourselves whether it describes a literal temple, or is what we read a metaphor of the New Jerusalem? The genre would lead me to expect the latter.

With this in mind, you might understand why I do not follow literalist approaches to Rev 20:1-7. One author who advocates a literal reading of the text claimed that "Old Testament promises plus Rev 20:1-10 demand a literal, earthly kingdom of 1000 years."[63] Another author[64] has argued that, though the chains around Satan's arms may

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[62]Johnson, *Expository Hermeneutics*, 270-88.

[63]J. S. Feinberg, *Continuity and Discontinuity*, 82.

[64]Walvoord, "The Theological Significance."

be metaphorical, the 1000 years definitely are not. The distinction between the chains and the 1000 years is too subtle for me. I agree with Waltke when he says that if in Revelation 20 the "abyss," "chain," "dragon," and "key" are symbolic "why should the number 1000 be literal, especially when the numbers are notoriously symbolic in apocalyptic literature?"[65]

Dispensationalism sees no problem in understanding the metaphorical qualities or, to put it another way, the redemptive-historical function of biblical themes and institutions. Indeed, the tabernacle looks forward to Christ, the priesthood to Christ, the sacrifices to Christ, the exodus to Christ. Jerusalem and Zion prefigure Christ. But is this not a form of what is called spiritualization? It is not a big step to go on and say that Israel anticipates Christ and the Church (through union with Christ). This identification is particularly plausible in the light of the fact that the Church is called every conceivable synonym of Israel (i.e., 1 Pet 2:9; Romans 4). In addition, as Waltke has pointed out,[66] there is no clear and undebated reference to a future independent fulfillment of Old Testament promises to ethnic Israel in the entire New Testament.

I have read among dispensationalists that there is a distinction between *types* which do have this kind of spiritual fulfillment in the New Testament and *prophecies* which have a literal fulfillment. The problem with this literalist approach is that prophecies include typologies, for instance the prophecy of the New Temple at the end of Ezekiel. I would also see an instance of this in prophecies which give promises to Israel.

I believe that much of the Old Testament has been fulfilled in Christ and since Christ is an Israelite and Christians are in union with Christ, Christians partake of the benefits promised to Israel and Judah.

When we read in the Old Testament of such institutions as the tabernacle/temple, exodus, sacrifice, priesthood, divine warfare, Zion/Jerusalem, we are reading of things which have passed away never to be seen again because the reality of these shadows has come. It is incredible to think that the history of redemption might progress by a backward step so that the temple would be rebuilt, or sacrifice reinstituted, or the priesthood reconsecrated. Zion stands for the heavenly Jerusalem, the church of the first born (Hebrews 12) in a way that to me at least countervenes what Scofield said (*Scofield Bible Correspondence School*, 45–46, quoted in Poythress, 24):

> Jerusalem is always Jerusalem, Israel always Israel, Zion always Zion. . . .Prophecies may never be spiritualized, but are always literal.

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[65]B. Waltke, *Continuity and Discontinuity*, 273.
[66]Ibid.

One additional problem I have with so-called literal interpreta-
tions of the biblical text is that they often resort to distinctions, like a
distinction between fulfillment and application. Poythress points out a
similar phenomenon when he deals with Scofield's note on Gal 3:8-9,
16-19, 29:

> these verses, note especially vs. 29, "If you belong to Christ, then you are
> Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise."

He says that Scofield "neatly defuses this problem by arguing that
there are two parallel offsprings, physical and spiritual, earthly and
heavenly. Hence fulfillment in the spiritual offspring is not the fulfill-
ment Israel waits for."[67]

I have heard it said that the New Testament only witnesses to
literal fulfillment of prophecy. I, however, remain unconvinced. I think
it is more than fair to say that the New Testament leads us to allow for
if not expect nonliteral fulfillments to Old Testament prophecies. The
following texts, among others, deserve careful study in this regard:
Amos 15:11-12 in Acts 15:14-18, and Joel 2:28-32 in Acts 2:16-21.
Notice as well the prophecy in Isaiah 40 that "every mountain shall be
lifted up and every hill made low" as it is used in reference to the events
before Jesus' earthly ministry has a non-literal fulfillment.

As I study the text and meditate upon the second coming of Christ
there is yet another signal that leads me to expect a non-literal inter-
pretation of prophecy and that is the use of multiple images for the
same event. In Revelation 1 Christ returns on a cloud; however, Rev
19:11ff. pictures Christ on a horse. As I meditate upon it I would
expect neither, however I should be open to both.

This leads me to my last statement. We should be open to literal
and/or spiritual fulfillments of prophecy. That is why I remain open on
most questions of eschatology. The generation that received Christ had
it all scoped out. They listened to the cries of the late apocalyptic
writers and thought that a literal political divine warrior would appear.
This expectation was prevalent not just among Pharisees; even John
the Baptist held it. But they were wrong. Jesus was a Divine Warrior,
but his warfare was spiritual, not physical.[68] He countervened their
expectations. If we insist on a precise literal interpretation of prophecy
are we not in danger of falling into the same error?

[67]Poythress, *Understanding Dispensationalism*, 26-27.
[68]Longman, "The Divine Warrior."

RESPONSE TO ELLIOTT JOHNSON

Let me begin by thanking Dr. Johnson for his thoughtful paper. I am delightfully surprised with how much we are in agreement on a number of important matters. Each year, I believe, dispensationalist and covenantal biblical scholars come closer and closer to one another. The biblical text itself is bringing us together in unity.

I must also confess, however, that a part of me is asking whether we are really dealing with "the fundamental difference between dispensationalist hermeneutics and other expressions of evangelical hermeneutics."[1] My skepticism arises because, though we seem able to agree to such a large extent on method, exegetical conclusions are often so different.

Nonetheless, if Dr. Johnson's paper represents the heart of dispensationalism, then it is truly welcome to see how close it is to a Vosian biblical theology. Johnson's use of the organic metaphor of bud-flower for the relationship between the Testaments is very typical of the school of biblical theology as we practice it at Westminster. While saying this, let me also protest that it is unfair to place the bud-flower analogy over against Waltke's egg-shell image as if that describes his whole approach to the relationship between the New and the Old. Indeed, I don't think we can use one type of metaphor to understand the relationship between the Testaments.

It is reductionist to describe the complex and subtle relationship between the Testaments under one model. I can see, on the one hand, how certain themes unfold slowly and progressively along the lines of a bud turning into a beautiful flower. The divine warrior theme so develops. However, some themes and institutions of the Old Testament pass away and are discarded in a sense. The tabernacle was an important institution and theological concept in the Old Testament, but it is rendered obsolete once Christ comes. As a matter of fact, it may be best to see that often there is both organic development (bud-flower) as well as a contrast (egg-shell) between the Old and New Testaments. As we study covenant, we chart an organic development as one covenant builds on another finally culminating in the New Covenant. But we must also feel the force of a statement like that of Heb 8:13:

> By calling the covenant "new," he has made the first one obsolete; and what is obsolete and aging will soon disappear.

In light of the above, I would address three questions to Dr. Johnson:

1. How does your understanding of the progress of redemption especially as captured in the organic bud-flower image differ from that of covenant theology as expressed by Vos?

[1] All unmarked quotations are taken from the paper by E. E. Johnson.

2. Is the view which you represent a significant departure from classic dispensationalism?
3. Isn't there also some force to the shell–egg analogy? With this last question let me remark how surprised I am to be arguing for discontinuity between the Testaments in the present crowd.

My next reaction to Johnson's paper is to inquire whether it is fair to say that the New Testament's use of the Old Testament illustrates a consistent application of the historical-grammatical method. I will raise this issue by questioning some of Johnson's exegetical arguments.

1. Serpent=Satan. I agree with his analysis as far as he has gone. But he has not established that the New Testament could have known that the serpent was specifically Satan simply from a historical-grammatical exegesis of Genesis 2 and 3. For instance, why should we say that the serpent is Satan and not one of his minions? In other words, in its Old Testament context the serpent is an unnamed, unspecified enemy of God. That it is Satan is only to be learned from the New Testament.
2. Johnson's work on Galatians is helpful. He does an admirable job of showing that "the Old Testament is sufficient to *anticipate* the descendents of Abraham who was yet to come and who will accomplish what God had promised."

I do not agree with him, however, that Paul has pursued a strict "historical investigation" to come to this interpretation. I say this especially in light of the first part of Gal 3:16 (which Johnson does not deal with):

> The Scripture does not say "and to seeds," meaning many people.

Thus, Paul not only identifies Christ as the seed, he excludes the Israelites and specifically Isaac and the other patriarchs from association with the seed. In other words, the difficult part of the verse to establish from the Old Testament is not the fulfillment in Christ, but Paul's exclusion of others. Can we really get this understanding from a strictly historical-grammatical interpretation of the text? As I read along in the patriarchal narratives I get the impression that as Isaac is born and as the Israelites expand, the promise of the seed is involved.

In light of this, I would like to consider Johnson's criticism of G. E. Ladd.[2] He worries about Ladd's language when he speaks of the New Testament *reinterpreting* the Old Testament. However, Ladd is not saying that the New Testament is reinterpreting in the sense of

[2]G. E. Ladd, "Historic Premillennialism" in *The Meaning of the Millennium: Four Views* (IVP, 1977) 17–59.

contradicting or changing the character of the Old Testament as much as he rightly recognizes that the New Testament often brings out the deeper meaning of the passage which was veiled from the Old Testament audience. In light of the Christ event, we can see the connection.

A fair reader of Hos 11:1 in its Old Testament context must admit that Matthew's reference to it in connection with Christ's life is unanticipated (3:15). The Old Testament context clearly remembers the historical exodus. Nonetheless, it is appropriate because of the exodus analogy of Christ's life which is developed fully by the Scriptures. We cannot impute a knowledge of this, however, to Hosea or anyone in the Old Testament time period. It became clear only in the light of the Christ event.

In my paper I mentioned that dispensationalists agree with covenant theologians in noting the connection between the tabernacle, priesthood, and sacrifice and Jesus Christ. These Old Testament institutions are fulfilled in Christ. However, the connection between these institutions and Christ was not known by the Old Testament authors nor could it be gleaned by means of a historical-grammatical interpretation of the text. It is only in the light of the New Testament that these Old Testament shadows are *reinterpreted* in the light of the Christ event.

In the same manner as the tabernacle, sacrifice, and priesthood, we should follow the overall pattern of the New Testament and explicit New Testament references to the church as "a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God" (1 Pet 2:9) in order to identify Israel with the church today. Indeed all of these, including Israel, are "spiritualized" in 1 Pet 2:5: "you also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ."

Let me conclude that I am excited to see Dr. Johnson use the bud–flower image to describe the relationship between Old Testament and New Testament. It is this understanding which leads to a view that the Old Testament ultimately must be read in the light of the New Testament and not vice versa. I'm not a gardener, so when I look at a bud I have no idea what the flower is going to look like in detail, its color or shape. I cannot predict the form or shape of the flower from its bud. But I do understand the bud better after looking at the flower. It is imperative to read the Old Testament in the light of the New Testament.