

An Evaluation of Non-Dispensational Hermeneutical Presuppositions

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Introduction

Non-dispensationalists¹ must use allegorical, or non-literal interpretation² on particular portions of Scripture. These portions are mainly eschatological in nature but also include references to Israel, primarily (but not always) in the Old Testament. In the prophetic portions, non-literal hermeneutics are used to interpret passages as already fulfilled in a non-literal manner. In reference to Israel, non-dispensationalists generally use non-literal hermeneutics to interpret some promises given to Israel as belonging to the Church (the so-called “spiritual Israel”) – God's elect people.³

In order for non-dispensationalists to justify their non-literal interpretive methodology there must be an adherence to certain presuppositions. These presuppositions follow a logical progression and are rarely, if ever, acknowledged by non-dispensationalists. It is the purpose of this brief paper to question and evaluate the presuppositions of non-dispensational hermeneutics and to expose the logical invalidity and the illegitimacy of non-literal interpretation.

Non-dispensational statements

Non-dispensationalists often make statements that the Old Testament cannot be interpreted by itself but must be interpreted by the New. Statements of this nature are necessary to support their non-literal hermeneutics. To give warrant to these types of statements, a philosophical tenet is posited called *sensus plenior*. Three quotations from non-dispensationalists are salient at this point:

First, according to Fee and Stuart, “Sensus plenior (fuller meaning) is a function of inspiration, not illumination. The same Holy Spirit who inspired an Old Testament author to write a certain set of words or a passage, can inspire a New Testament writer to by-pass the usual considerations of context, intent, style and wording and identify that set of words or that passage as having a second meaning.”⁴

Second, in the same vein Ladd writes,

The Old Testament must be interpreted by the New Testament. In principle it is quite possible that the prophecies addressed originally to literal Israel describing physical blessings have their

1 In this paper, the term “non-dispensationalists” generally refers to those who adhere to Covenant Theology, Reformed Theology, and Progressive Dispensationalism, but also includes other theologies which do not adhere to traditional Dispensationalism.

2 In this paper, *allegorical* or *non-literal* interpretation/hermeneutics refers to anything other than, or in addition to historical-grammatical hermeneutics, whereas *literal* does refer to historical-grammatical hermeneutics.

3 e.g., Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, pp.452-453, 631-633; Wayne Grudem, *Bible Doctrine*, p.369; C. Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 3, p.737

4 Fee & Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth*, pp.165-166

fulfillment exclusively in the spiritual blessings enjoyed by the church. It is also possible that the Old Testament expectation of a kingdom on earth could be *reinterpreted* by the New Testament altogether of blessings in the spiritual realm.⁵ [emphasis added]

Lastly, in reference to Israel and Old Testament eschatology, Berkhof says, “It is very doubtful, however, whether Scripture warrants the expectation that Israel will finally be re-established as a nation, and will as a nation turn to the Lord. Some Old Testament prophecies seem to predict this, but these should be read in the light of the New Testament.”⁶

In order to support the view that Old Testament prophecies “should be read in the light of the New Testament,” and that the “Old Testament must be interpreted by the New Testament,” appeals are often made to New Testament passages which appear to interpret the Old Testament text in a non-literal way, thus giving warrant to non-literal interpretation.

Passages used to support non-literal hermeneutics

There are generally three ways that the New Testament uses the Old Testament which are appealed to in order to support the practice of non-literal interpretation. (1) *Allegory*. The New Testament uses the Old Testament to make an allegory of a spiritual truth. The major passage for this appeal is Galatians 4:21-31, in which Paul makes an allegory out of the Old Testament record of Sarah and Hagar. The argument here is that, if Paul interpreted the Old Testament allegorically, or non-literally, then it warrants the addition of an allegorical (i.e., non-literal) principle to one's hermeneutics.

(2) *Types*. A second way the New Testament uses the Old is to highlight types that point to Christ. The book of Hebrews is a major Scriptural passage wherein the writer uses Old Testament types to illustrate the superiority of Christ to the ceremonial portions of the Mosaic Law. The argument here is that, because Christ fulfilled Old Testament types and shadows, one may make typological, non-literal extrapolations in their interpretation.⁷

(3) *Non-literal fulfillment*. A third way the New Testament *supposedly* uses the Old is by noting a non-literal fulfillment of prophecy. The major passage cited is Acts 2:16-21, 33, in which Peter applies the prophecy of Joel, which concerns the Day of the Lord, to the events occurring on the Day of Pentecost. The argument is that, if Peter claims that the prophecy of Joel was actually fulfilled on the Day of Pentecost, then it was not fulfilled literally; giving warrant to non-literal interpretation.

Also included in these ways that the New Testament uses the Old would be passages concerning Israel; passages like Romans 2:28-29 and Galatians 6:16 which, supposedly, only *appear* to speak of a

5 G.E. Ladd, *Review and Expositor*, no.57 (1960), p.167

6 Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, p.774

7 For a defense of the Typological hermeneutic see Hank Hanegraaff, *The Apocalypse Code*, ch. 6

“spiritual” Israel but are in actuality referring to the Church. In any case, it would appear that the New Testament is using the Old Testament in an other-than-literal way, thus warranting non-literal interpretation. Of course, other passages are often appealed to in order to support non-literal hermeneutics, but the above passages are the main ones non-dispensationalists cite.⁸ But do these appeals actually warrant the addition of non-literal hermeneutics to one's interpretive methodology, or are there underlying presuppositions involved in the appeals themselves?

Presuppositions

Although the non-dispensationalist may appear to have warrant for using non-literal interpretation, there are a few presuppositions that are absolutely essential to their warrant which must be evaluated. If it can be demonstrated that any one of these presuppositions is invalid then it will prove that non-literal interpretation is unwarranted from Scripture and is therefore unbiblical. Below are seven (7) presuppositions that, whether acknowledged or not, must be proven conclusively and incontrovertibly in order for non-literal hermeneutics to be warranted from Scripture.

Presupposition #1: *The New Testament actually does re-interpret the Old Testament.* This presupposition is necessary to non-dispensational hermeneutics because if the New Testament does not reinterpret the Old Testament then it means that the New reaffirms the literal meaning of the Old, which inevitably leads to dispensational conclusions. The non-dispensationalist must prove conclusively that the New Testament actually does (re)interpret the plain, literal meaning of the Old Testament into a non-literal meaning. Yes, the New Testament does indeed use the Old Testament in various ways (e.g., application, illustration, types, allegories etc.). However, can it be proven beyond doubt that the New actually does alter the original literal meaning of the Old so that its apparent historical-grammatical meaning is merely illusory? Or is it possible that *all* New Testament usages of the Old Testament *exclude* reinterpretation/ altered meaning? The non-dispensationalist must answer this issue. If it cannot be proven conclusively then the presupposition is fallacious.

Presupposition #2: *There are objective criteria for recognizing when reinterpretation occurs.* This actually could be considered presupposition #1b, because along with #1 there is an essential epistemic question that must also be answered: How is one to recognize if/when the New Testament is reinterpreting the Old? In other words, what are the criteria for recognizing when the New Testament is reinterpreting the Old and when it is using it in some other way? The non-dispensationalist must

⁸ In addition to appeals to Scriptural *content*, non-dispensationalists also appeal to the *literary genre* of passages in order to support their non-literal hermeneutic. The argument is that, if a Scriptural text is in a poetic, apocalyptic, or parabolic literary genre, it warrants the use of non-literal interpretation. Thus, the genre in which the Scriptural text is situated is a determinant for whether non-literal interpretation is warranted. This is a subject for another paper. For this paper, focus will be given to the presuppositions involved in the appeals to the *content* of Scriptural passages.

demonstrate that there are objective criteria for recognizing the difference between reinterpretation and typology, application, illustration, etc.. If there are no objective criteria, the presupposition is fallacious. To repeat, if it is even *possible* that all New Testament usages of the Old Testament exclude reinterpretation/altered meaning, then the basis for this presupposition is, at best, indeterminable.⁹

Presupposition #3: *The interpreter's inference is necessary.* This presupposition is necessary to non-dispensational hermeneutics because if the inferences are not necessary then their non-dispensational conclusions are logically invalid. If presuppositions #1 and #2 are true, the non-dispensationalist must also prove conclusively that the inference of the New Testament's reinterpretation of the Old Testament's text is actually necessitated by the text. Scriptural truth carries necessary inferences and implications, and these often affect the interpretation of other propositions of Scripture. However, there are some inferences and implications that the interpreter may see which are not actually necessitated by the Scriptural text. Such an inference may be either true or untrue, but it is certainly unnecessary. Since unnecessary inferences are not certainly true, only necessary inferences ought to be used for interpretation. If an inference is unnecessary, the presupposition is fallacious. So, the question here is, 'Is the inference necessary?' Both dispensationalists and non-dispensationalists see inferences in Scripture. The difference is that the inferences the non-dispensationalist sees are not always necessitated by the text whereas the dispensationalist's are. Frequently, non-dispensational inferences are based on prior theology – prior theology that must rest on the previous presuppositions. Thus, if the previous presuppositions are fallacious then this presupposition is also.

Presupposition #4: *The interpreter is free to make extrapolations based on inference.* This presupposition is necessary to non-dispensational hermeneutics because if the non-dispensationalist is not free to make extrapolations of inferences, then the door is left open for non-supersessionism which naturally leads to dispensational conclusions. Both dispensationalists and non-dispensationalists do this. The difference between dispensational inferential extrapolation and non-dispensational is that the dispensationalist's inferences and their extrapolations are not based on a supposed altered Old Testament meaning, but are in harmony and consistent with the original, literal meaning. However, if presuppositions #1-#3 are true, the non-dispensationalist must also prove conclusively that the interpreter is free, not only to make an inference that alters the meaning of one Old Testament passage, but then to extrapolate it to cover more than what the New Testament text actually cites. The non-dispensationalist must answer this question: 'What gives the interpreter warrant to extrapolate an inference and employ it in more than the single passage in question?' In other words (and simplified), if

⁹ Dispensationalist Arnold Fruchtenbaum lists four different ways the New Testament quotes the Old, and concludes that all quotations exclude re-interpretation. Thus, to the dispensationalist, re-interpretation is not a legitimate category of New Testament quotation of the Old Testament. See Fruchtenbaum, *Israelology*, pp.842-845

the New Testament does reinterpret a specific Old Testament passage, then why is one allowed to apply the reinterpretation of the one Old Testament passage to other passages? This presupposition must be critically analyzed. If it can be shown that the interpreter is not free to apply non-literal inferential extrapolations to uncited texts, then this presupposition is unwarranted.

Presupposition #5: *There are objective criteria for recognizing when an extrapolated inference should be made to related Old Testament passages.* Since presupposition #4 is necessary to non-dispensational hermeneutics, this presupposition is also necessary to non-dispensational hermeneutics. If presuppositions #1-#4 are true, then the non-dispensationalist must also prove conclusively *when* the extrapolation should be applied to other passages. What must be determined here are not only the criteria that should be used to recognize which Old Testament passages should have an extrapolation applied and which should not, but also whether the criteria are objective. The question here is, 'How does one recognize when a passage of the Old Testament requires the application of the extrapolated inference?' This leads to the following presupposition.

Presupposition #6: *Applying a New Testament extrapolated inference to the Old Testament is not subjective.* These final two presuppositions are consequences of the previous presuppositions. If presuppositions #1-#5 are true, then it requires that the Old Testament meaning is subjected to reinterpretation by the New. Therefore, the non-dispensationalist's non-literal hermeneutics are intrinsically *subjective*. The grave danger (as will be shown next) is that subjective reinterpretation denies independent meaning to the receptor passage. The non-dispensationalist, then, *must* hold this presupposition if he is to honor Scriptural authority. The question here is, 'Why is the application of a non-literal extrapolated inference that alters the meaning of the Old Testament text *not* subjective?'

Presupposition #7: *Despite the previous presuppositions, the Old Testament retains independent meaning.* If presuppositions #1-#5 are true, and #6 is false, then the non-dispensationalist must prove conclusively that the Old Testament retains independent meaning and is not dependent on the New Testament. This is the necessary ramification of the prior presuppositions. If presuppositions #1-#5 are true, and #6 is false, then by logical necessity, the Old Testament has no independent meaning; there is no other conclusion, it is inescapable. The question the non-dispensationalist must answer is, 'How can the Old Testament have independent meaning if its meaning depends on the New Testament?' This is the heart of the issue between dispensationalists and non-dispensationalists. The dispensationalist sees the Old Testament possessing its own meaning that is not altered by the New Testament, which allows him to be free from this presupposition. However, the non-dispensationalist must hold this presupposition if he is to honor the fixed nature of Scripture.

Progression of the presuppositions

To summarize, here is how the progression of the presuppositions operates:

1. If the New Testament actually does re-interpret the Old Testament, then it is necessary that...
2. There are objective criteria for recognizing when reinterpretation occurs. If there are objective criteria, it must then be shown that...
3. The interpreter's inference is necessary. If it is necessary, it must then be shown that...
4. The interpreter is free to make extrapolations based on inference. If the interpreter has warrant, it must then be shown that...
5. There are objective criteria for recognizing when an extrapolated inference should be made to related Old Testament passages. If there are objective criteria, it must then be shown that...
6. Applying a New Testament extrapolated inference to the Old Testament is *not* subjective.

Taking all the previous presuppositions together, it must be finally shown that...

7. Despite the previous presuppositions, the Old Testament retains independent meaning.

Evaluation

To repeat, all seven of the presuppositions are essential to non-dispensational non-literal interpretation, and if it can be shown that just one of them is fallacious then their non-literal hermeneutics are unwarranted and therefore invalid for use in one's interpretive methodology.

Evaluation of presupposition #1: *The New Testament actually does re-interpret the Old Testament.* The dispensationalist agrees with the non-dispensationalist that the New Testament interprets the Old. However, the dispensationalist rejects the proposition that the New Testament gives a meaning to the Old Testament text that is not in agreement with an autonomous literal interpretation of the Old; the New does not *re*interpret the Old. In opposition, the non-dispensationalist affirms that the New Testament gives a meaning to the Old Testament text that is not in agreement with an autonomous literal interpretation of the Old. This presupposition cannot be proven as a necessary conclusion; only as a possible conclusion. It is possible that *every* New Testament usage of the Old Testament agrees with an autonomous literal interpretation of the Old. Therefore, as long as it remains possible that *all* New Testament usages of the Old Testament *exclude* reinterpretation/altered meaning, this presupposition cannot be established as a legitimate presupposition. Lastly, due to invalidity of the following presupposition, this presupposition has no logically valid basis and is therefore false.

Evaluation of presupposition #2: *There are objective criteria for recognizing when reinterpretation occurs.* Although the New Testament does indeed contain interpretations of the Old Testament, it never explicitly states if/when it is giving a meaning to the Old Testament that differs

from a literal interpretation.¹⁰ Therefore, it is impossible for one's criteria to be ascertained objectively. One's criteria must be based on circular reasoning. To illustrate the fallacy: in order to determine when the New Testament is interpreting the Old Testament in a non-literal way, one must observe if the interpretation is literal or non-literal. So, the criteria for determining when the New Testament is reinterpreting the Old are based on whether the New Testament is reinterpreting the Old. Since this presupposition is based on circular reasoning it is fallacious. This means that it is not possible to objectively recognize if/when the New Testament is reinterpreting the Old, and when it is using it in some other way. To base the existence of contingent criteria upon their own existence is fallacious.

Because these first two presuppositions are indeterminable and unprovable, and since all of the following non-dispensational presuppositions rest upon these two presuppositions, the following presuppositions therefore have no objective basis. Furthermore, since these first two presuppositions are indeterminable and unprovable, it renders the entire non-literal hermeneutic intrinsically subjective.

Evaluation of presupposition #3: *The interpreter's inference is necessary.* Although this presupposition must be dealt with on a case-by-case basis, some general objectives are applicable. If the non-dispensationalist sees an inference which is not necessitated by the text and which is based on prior theology – prior theology that must rest on presuppositions #1 and #2 – then the inference is fallacious. Unfortunately, when it comes to issues of eschatology and Israelology the non-dispensationalist is forced to hold unnecessary inferences that are based upon the fallacious criteria of presupposition #2. To illustrate, Romans 2:28-29 declares, “For he is not a Jew, which is one outwardly... But he is a Jew, which is one inwardly.” The non-dispensationalist would see an inference that would apply this to Gentile believers of this age. However, the context of the passage does not necessitate this inference, while it does necessitate the inference of ethnic Jews (vv. 17, 25, 27). To see Gentiles in this passage is to posit an unnecessary inference based on an alleged reinterpretation of the definition of *Jew* that now includes non-Jews. Since the inferences required by non-dispensationalists to warrant non-literal hermeneutics are not necessitated by the actual text, and because the inferences rest upon prior presuppositions and theology, it must be concluded that this presupposition is fallacious.

Evaluation of presupposition #4: *The interpreter is free to make extrapolations based on inference.* While both dispensationalists and non-dispensationalists make extrapolations of inferences from the text, the non-dispensational extrapolations are inconsistent and disagree with a literal interpretation of the Old Testament. In order for an extrapolation to be used in other passages of

¹⁰ Some would use Galatians 4:24 to support this presupposition (for example, see the ESV's erroneous translation; “this may be interpreted allegorically”), but the word Greek word ἐρμηνεύω does not appear in the passage. Therefore, the tenet that Paul is interpreting the Old Testament in Galatians 4:24 has no exegetical support; it is purely assumption. It is best to see the passage as an illustration of the Old Testament, not as an interpretation.

Scripture one must have warrant from the extrapolated text to do so. Unfortunately for the non-dispensationalist, this is never the case. When the non-dispensationalist applies an inferential extrapolation to other passages, they do so without necessary warrant from the Scriptural text. To illustrate again with Romans 2:28-29, the non-dispensationalist would extrapolate this to apply, not only to Gentile believers of this age (an unnecessary inference), but also to Old Testament saints prior to Jacob.¹¹ Yet, the context of the passage does not necessitate this inference (current Gentiles) nor the extrapolation (Old Testament Gentile saints). Many other examples could be given, but the non-dispensational extrapolations, while logically possible, are never required by the Scriptural text and are therefore unwarranted. To see them as necessary, as the non-dispensationalist must do to support his non-literal hermeneutics, is fallacious; as is the necessary reliance upon prior invalid presuppositions.

Evaluation of presupposition #5: *There are objective criteria for recognizing when an extrapolated inference should be made to related Old Testament passages.* It is not possible for the non-dispensationalist's criteria concerning which passages should have any given extrapolation applied to it to be ascertained objectively through the receptor text. It must be ascertained through non-textual factors, based on prior theology. To illustrate, the non-dispensationalist sees “the Church” and “Israel” as synonyms in certain places but not others. This is exposed in Deuteronomy 28-30 wherein God promises blessings and curses upon *Israel*. If “Israel” extrapolated refers to the Church, then the faithful Church – i.e., the “spiritual Israel” – is rewarded with the blessings, but since God cannot curse the Church, then the curses cannot belong to the Church but must belong to the Jewish nation.¹² This, however, does not adhere to the actual text of Deuteronomy 28-30 because the same pronouns are used to designate the recipient of both the blessings and the curses. This type of non-literal meaning is not ascertained from the actual text, nor from a proper use of an extrapolation. Thus, since the criteria are based on an extrapolated inference, and since the inference is based on the fallacious epistemic criteria of presupposition #2, the factors that must determine the criteria of this presupposition are fallacious.

Evaluation of presupposition #6: *Applying a New Testament extrapolated inference to the Old Testament is not subjective.* If an inferential extrapolation is applied to a passage that changes the meaning of that passage, the original meaning is then superseded, or replaced by the meaning of the extrapolation. Therefore, the meaning of the passage is subjected to a foreign determinant. This demonstrates that the presupposition is false, and that the prior presuppositions do in fact result in subjective interpretation. This is the major danger of non-literal interpretation. If the New Testament does reinterpret the Old, it requires that the New subjects the Old to a meaning foreign to the human

11 For example, see G.K. Beale, *Revelation: A Shorter Commentary*, pp.149-150

12 For an example of this view, see Matthew Henry's commentary on Deuteronomy 28-30 in which Henry makes unwarranted vacillations between national Israel and the spiritual Church.

author's language. On the part of the interpreter, non-literal hermeneutics are inherently plagued by subjective decisions about which Old Testament texts warrant the application of New Testament inferential extrapolation. In other words, the determinant is not within the Old Testament text; it is foreign to the Old Testament. Rather, the determinant is the meaning that the interpreter is required to give the text based on prior theology – theology based on extrapolated inference(s). Non-dispensationalists who do acknowledge the subjective nature of their hermeneutics are unbothered and undeterred by it since they ignore critical evaluation of the presuppositions necessary to employ their non-literal, subjective interpretation. This, however, is a grave problem for Bible honoring non-dispensationalists.¹³ The previous presuppositions, if true, do indeed result in a subjective hermeneutic.

Evaluation of presupposition #7: *Despite the previous presuppositions, the Old Testament retains independent meaning.* The Bible-honoring non-dispensationalist must affirm independent Old Testament meaning, which in turn requires him to hold this presupposition. Unfortunately, if presuppositions #1-#5 are true, then #6 is false. This, then, necessitates that the Old Testament cannot retain its own independent meaning, but loses it. Its meaning is superseded, or replaced by a meaning that differs from the one produced by a literal hermeneutic. To repeat, because of the previous presuppositions, the non-dispensationalist is required to affirm that the meaning of the Old Testament is determined by the New, which then requires the denial that the Old Testament has its own independent meaning. Since the previous presuppositions result in the denial of independent Old Testament meaning, this presupposition cannot be true but must be false.

Conclusion

There are two major ramifications of the seven presuppositions which render the non-literal hermeneutics of the non-dispensationalist illegitimate for the interpretation of God's word. First, the necessary denial of intrinsic, independent Old Testament meaning requires that the original audience to whom the Old Testament was written either must have had full knowledge of the New Testament or that they could not actually understand the Old Testament because it had no meaning of its own. This further means that the Old Testament had no meaning until the New Testament canon was completed, which denies both the perspicuity and the fixed nature of the meaning of Scripture.

Second, the necessary denial of Old Testament independent meaning requires that God did/does not actually communicate to man through the Old Testament text. If the meaning of the Old Testament text is determined by the New Testament and not by itself, this necessitates that the Old Testament cannot communicate God's intended meaning; God's intended meaning is to be found in the New

¹³ Bible-honoring non-dispensationalists would be those who adhere to the affirmations and denials of the Chicago Statement on Biblical Hermeneutics. See Radmacher and Preus, *Hermeneutics, Inerrancy and the Bible*.

Testament, not in the Old. Moreover, since language conveys meaning, this creates a schism between the human author's language, which conveys one meaning, and the actual divine meaning, which bypasses the signification of the human author's language (i.e., *sensus plenior*). This further creates two meanings to the text; one true and one false, one right (God's meaning) and one wrong (the human author's meaning). Since it is impossible to discern from the actual text which meaning is which, this necessitates that there can be no fixed meaning to the text. This, then, ultimately denies the objective truth (inerrancy) of Scripture, for Scripture cannot be objectively true if its meaning is not fixed.

In conclusion, to build an interpretive methodology upon indeterminable and unnecessary presuppositions is illegitimate. It has been shown that all seven (not just one) of the non-dispensational presuppositions that are necessary to warrant their non-literal hermeneutics are, in fact, fallacious (i.e., *non-sequitur*). Therefore, this evaluation of non-dispensational hermeneutical presuppositions and the necessary ramifications of non-literal interpretation demonstrates that the non-dispensational interpretive methodology is unacceptable for the interpreter of the word of God since it must result in denying the Old Testament independent meaning. Therefore, the dispensational adherence to *consistent* literal (historical-grammatical) hermeneutics, which affirms independent Old Testament meaning, is justified and is the only legitimate interpretive method.