

The Last Days of Dispensationalism – A Review

By Sam Mangai

It is no secret that Laidlaw College is anything but a friend of dispensational premillennialism. The college's liberationist, supersessionist theology, drives an underlying eschatological view that can at best be described as antagonistic towards dispensationalism. What is unfortunate – and somewhat ironic - is that the man from whom the college currently draws its name, was a premillennialist who was sympathetic to dispensationalism.¹

The subtitle to Alistair Donaldson's *The Last Days of Dispensationalism* claims the book to be 'a scholarly critique of popular misconceptions'.² As a Christian who seems to have appropriated some "popular misconceptions", I had hoped that this book would offer a fair, well-reasoned, and indeed scholarly evaluation of the dispensational position. Above all, I had hoped that this book would promote, and encourage, sound, biblical theology as it relates to eschatology and ecclesiology. Unfortunately, I found it to have failed on all accounts.

Chapter One: The Hermeneutics of Dispensationalism

In chapter one, Donaldson begins his critique of the hermeneutics of dispensational premillennialism by trying to discredit the use of word 'literal', in the term 'literal interpretation'.³ He talks about the (apparently still?) difficult task of figuring out what 'literal' actually means when used by classic dispensationalists (hereafter, dispensationalists). He quotes Charles Ryrie (presumably hoping that his readers will take him and Ryrie at face value, i.e. literally), allowing him to clarify 'literal interpretation' as being "normal or plain interpretation".⁴ However, he dismisses Ryrie's definitions, charging him with holding to an interpretive methodology that is prone to deriving meaning from words in *isolation*.

But this isn't true of Ryrie at all; what's more, Donaldson doesn't substantiate his claim. He quickly slides into a discussion concerning the role of language in hermeneutics, and in doing so, begins to reveal some interesting philosophical presuppositions that put him at variance with how most dispensationalists view language in a biblical philosophy of life. In his book, *Dispensationalism* (revised and expanded version), Ryrie says,

Philosophically, the purpose of language itself seems to require literal interpretation. Language was **given by God for the purpose of being able to communicate with mankind** [emphasis mine].⁵

Absolutely - God expected Adam to interpret him *literally* when he spoke to him concerning the fruit of the trees; as he also did Noah, after giving him the blueprint for the Ark. It would

seem, that even within the Trinity God interpreted Himself literally; intra-Trinity language is evident in the decree to, “make man in our image” even if the end product was merely analogous.⁶ Donaldson refers to Ryrie’s use of the term, “the received laws of language”, as being “vague” and “speaking of laws that are untold and assumed rather than stated and proven”.⁷ But mightn’t Ryrie be referring to man’s acquisition of language (laws and rules included) as indicated in the quote above? If so, said laws are stated and proven in the first two chapters of Genesis! Granted they are assumed, but only as part of the axiomatic epistemological and metaphysical base undergirding a *biblical* view of language.

Donaldson writes,

Further, they [that is interpreters such as Ryrie] can fail to integrate much that is widely accepted in the field of hermeneutical studies. One such aspect is that of genre.⁸

But this assumes that much of what is currently accepted in the field of hermeneutical studies *is* valid and *should* be integrated into one's interpretive methodology. Donaldson seems to be advocating majoritarian hermeneutics. Surely before any hermeneutical principle (or tool) is accepted it should be critiqued in light of Scripture? If it isn't, it may bring in unbiblical philosophical baggage.⁹

In Donaldson’s case, he appears to have (perhaps inadvertently) bought into the philosophy of language utilized by the hermeneutics scholars cited in his book. This becomes apparent when, in highlighting the importance of the use of literary genre as a hermeneutical tool, he approvingly cites the scholar Anthony C. Thisleton.¹⁰

Thisleton imported into the field of hermeneutics a perspective heavily reliant on modern language philosophy. His perspective unashamedly sought to shift hermeneutics away from the grammatical-historical approach so championed by dispensationalists. However, the language philosophy utilized by Thisleton (and others) came primarily from Immanuel Kant. And Kant, in working out his naturalistic cosmology known as the ‘Nebular Hypotheses’, clearly rejected up front Genesis chapters 1-11; the only authoritative source for any philosophy of language!¹¹ Therefore, any hermeneutical perspective that uses Kantian notions of language should be treated by the student of God’s Word as being suspect at best. Assuming of course, that we take Genesis *literally* and don’t slap a ‘poetic narrative’ genre-label on it so as to avoid naïve young-earth creationism.¹²

With the remainder of the chapter, Donaldson takes Ryrie to task concerning his interpretation of ‘Israel’, as used by Paul in Galatians 6:16, and tries to prove that the New Testament (NT) writers didn’t always interpret literally.¹³ He furnishes the latter, by setting up a straw-man argument, claiming that dispensationalists believe Jesus and the NT writers

used 'strict', or 'wooden', literalism (an approach that doesn't take into account figures of speech). This simply isn't true. Dispensationalists committed to a literal, grammatical-historical method of interpretation, are well aware of the role of figures of speech in biblical hermeneutics. In fact, one of the best books available on figures of speech in the bible was produced by the strict literalist (and hyper-dispensationalist!) E. W. Bullinger.¹⁴

The point concerning Galatians 6:16 is significant, as this is the *only* "proof" text offered by Amillennial Covenant Theologians to demonstrate that the Church is Israel.¹⁵ Donaldson offers an abysmal rebuttal of the interpretation that 'Israel' refers to the believing national remnant within the corporate, ethnic entity descended from Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob; opting instead for an interpretation that hinges upon the tenuous translation of the Greek word *kai* as 'even'. Concerning this interpretation he states in the footnotes,

The Greek word *kai* introducing the clause *kai epi ton Israel tou theou* can be understood as meaning "even" as translated in the NIV. **This interpretation seems preferable** in light of the context and supports the idea of the phrase functioning as a further descriptor of the "all who walk by this rule" [emphasis mine].¹⁶

Of course it will seem preferable if one approaches the text with presupposed Covenant Theology convictions! What's more, considering the wider context of Galatians and the grammar and syntax of 6:16, it would seem the reverse of Donaldson's assertion is true. Former professor of Greek and New Testament at Dallas Theological Seminary, Dr. S. Lewis Johnson writes,

It is necessary to begin this part of the discussion with a reminder of a basic, but often neglected, hermeneutical principle. It is this: in the absence of compelling exegetical and theological considerations, we should avoid the rarer grammatical usages when the common ones make good sense.

Because the latter usage serves well the view that the term "the Israel of God" is the church, the dogmatic concern overcame grammatical usage. An extremely rare usage has been made to replace the common usage, even in spite of the fact that the common and frequent usage of *and* makes perfectly good sense in Galatians 6:16.¹⁷

Johnson continues,

If there is an interpretation that totters on a tenuous foundation, it is the view that Paul equates the term "the Israel of God" with the believing church of Jews and Gentiles. To support it, the general usage of the term *Israel* in Paul, in the New Testament, and in the Scriptures as a whole is ignored. The grammatical and syntactical usage of the conjunction *kai* is strained and distorted-and the rare and uncommon sense accepted when the usual sense is unsatisfactory-only because it does not harmonize with the

presuppositions of the exegete. And to compound matters, in the special context of Galatians and the general context of the Pauline teaching, especially as highlighted in Romans 11, Paul's primary passages on God's dealings with Israel and the Gentiles, are downplayed... the doctrine that the church of Gentile and Jews is *the* Israel of God rests on an illusion. It is a classic case of tendentious exegesis.¹⁸

Chapter Two: Who is Israel?

Chapter two is a discussion of the dispensational and non-dispensational understandings of who Israel is in Scripture. Much of what is developed in this chapter, doctrinally speaking, falls out of the interpretive reasoning evident in chapter one. In that regard, I found the 'Rules of Affinity', created by Dr. Paul Henebury, to be a useful and helpful device to employ while reading through this chapter. Dr. Henebury's device allows one to measure the, "propositional distance between any given statement of a doctrine and the biblical passages used to support it".¹⁹

Donaldson begins his analysis of the dispensational understanding of the question, 'Who is Israel?', by referring to other "dispensational beliefs" (1000 year reign of Jesus in His earthly Millennial Kingdom, the rapture of the Church) as they relate to national Israel.²⁰ His contention is that these beliefs will stand or fall on the answer to the initial question. However, for Donaldson to answer the question from the text of Scripture, he must employ his **non**-dispensational hermeneutic and impose upon the text a presuppositional interpretive grid that militates against national Israel being understood in any biblically significant sense.

He rightly contends, that the answer to the question of who Israel is will "directly affect to some extent the manner in which Christians live".²¹ And seemingly in light of the ethical maxim, 'good doctrine begets good fruit; bad doctrine begets bad fruit', goes on to imply that dispensationalists are unethical by highlighting how they have "significantly shaped" American politics and its policies concerning the Middle East.²²

To that end, he is critical of dispensationalist William E. Blackstone's petition that sought the return of Jewish people to their national homeland.²³ Granted Blackstone's desire did coincide with his eschatology, but the actual impetus for what would later be known as the 'Blackstone Memorial', was the suffering of Russian Jews who were the target of government-led pogroms. Yet Donaldson would have us understand that Blackstone's noble efforts were unethical and self-serving!

It's at this stage that the focus of the book begins to morph from a critique of the dispensational position, into an anti-Israel/anti-Zionism tirade as Donaldson takes aim at

what can only be described as a caricature of dispensationalism. Furthermore, his method of interpretation takes on a distinctly anti-Judaic tone that is evident through the remainder of the chapter (and indeed the rest of the book). The usual theological whipping-boys for Covenant Theology (Falwell, Robertson, Lindsey, and LaHaye) get trotted out as examples of imperious dispensational Christian Zionists who continue to shape the Middle East through American politics.²⁴ For a theological position that is apparently in its last days, is it not rather anomalous to suggest that dispensationalism possesses such enormous geopolitical power? According to Donaldson, many Christians who are pro-Israel are logically anti-Palestinian; offering as proof of his assertion, a quote from John Hagee that doesn't actually talk about Christian sentiments towards Palestinians!²⁵ What's more, Donaldson assumes that the majority of dispensationalists agree with the political opinions of men like Robertson and Hagee.

His actual handling of a dispensational Israelology (a term coined by dispensationalist Arnold Fruchtenbaum) is poor, and relies upon his (supposed) refutation of the hermeneutics of dispensationalism.²⁶ After rehashing the oft-refuted and tired argument of non-chilastic eschatology being superior because it's 'historic', Donaldson fleshes out his understanding of a non-dispensational Israelology. He offers a misguided argument concerning the biological constitution of the Jewish people, obfuscates on the Abrahamic and Mosaic Covenants (attempting to make the land promise to Israel conditional), and, in noting the Postmillennial, Amillennial, and Historic Premillennial considerations of Israel, does little more than demonstrate the eschatological schizophrenia that plagues Covenant Theology.

From here, things get decidedly unscholarly.

Donaldson's views become divorced from reality, as he refers to Israel as a tyrannical, racist, dehumanizing, apartheid-policy-producing nation that enforces an "illegal military occupation" within land that "rightfully belongs to Palestinians".²⁷ The baseless (and blatantly anti-Israeli) assertion that Israel practices apartheid, demonstrates a level of cognitive acuity similar to those who believe in Extraterrestrials or Santa Clause. As evidence of Israel's supposed "apartheid" policies, he quotes Ilan Pappé charging Israel with "ethnic cleansing", then bolsters this with a falsified quotation attributed to Zionist leader David Ben Gurion.²⁸ If Donaldson were really the scholar he believes himself to be, then surely he would know the history of the heavily-contested quote. Concerning its use by Israeli academic Benny Morris, Efraim Karsh writes,

The text in question was a book on the birth of the Palestinian refugee problem by Israeli academic Benny Morris. . . . While leafing through the book's English-language version, I came across a quote from a letter, written by David Ben-Gurion to his son Amos in 1937,

stating we must expel Arabs and take their places. This rang a distant bell. Having read the **books** Hebrew edition several years earlier, I recalled the letter as saying something quite different. Indeed, an examination of the Hebrew text confirmed my recollection. It read as follows: **We do not wish, we do not need to expel Arabs and take their place** [emphasis mine]. . . All our aspiration is built on the assumption . . . that there is enough room in the country for ourselves and the Arabs.²⁹

Donaldson goes on; seemingly ignorant of the history he's trying to revise, believing the 'West Bank' (biblical Judea and Samaria) to be occupied Palestinian Arab land. The historic Jewish heartland of Judea and Samaria was annexed by the *Jordanians* in 1949 who renamed it the 'West Bank' in 1950.³⁰ During the 1967 Six Day War, in which Israel was (again) the victim of genocidal Arab aggression, the IDF captured back the area. Hence, being land that was acquired in a *defensive* act, it should correctly be referred to as 'disputed land'.³¹ Judea and Samaria are not historic Palestinian Arab land and have never been part of some faux-Palestinian state. Donaldson cites John Mearsheimer, charging Israel with being the main obstacle to peace and Palestinian national aspirations (under the two-state solution). The absurdity of this notion is evident when one considers that it has been the Palestinian Arabs who have thus far squandered no less than 31 opportunities for statehood.³² What's more, there's the usual deafening silence regarding the vehemently anti-Semitic, anti-Israel ideology of the Palestinian Arab leadership. One must ask, is this not a significant obstacle to peace?

As part of the theological basis for his non-dispensational Israeology, Donaldson's offers 'A Rationale for Oneness' that understands Jesus to be the 'true Israel' (ergo all who are in Christ, are also Israel).³³ By relying on the standard typological hermeneutic of Covenant Theology and appealing to 'extended metaphors', the Old Testament (OT) promises to national Israel (specifically the land promise) get mystically 'caught up' into the person and work of Jesus, ultimately being fulfilled in and through the Church. Donaldson continues, speaking of 'metaphorical word pictures' and symbolic parallels, as he attempts to justify his method of reinterpreting the OT by the NT. He goes on, presupposing the over-arching (theological) Covenant of Grace, as he tries to derive an OT-NT continuity/unity that supports his contention that all OT promises are fulfilled metaphorically in Christ.

The problem with Donaldson's 'OT interpreted by the NT' methodology is highlighted by Dr. Paul Henebury, as he examines the effect it has on the authority of the OT and the perspicuity of the Scriptures as a whole. He writes,

It devalues the OT as its own witness to God and His Plans. For example, if the promises given to ethnic Israel of land, throne, temple, etc. are somehow "fulfilled" in Jesus and

the Church what was the point of speaking about them so pointedly? Cramming everything into Christ not only destroys the clarity and unity of Scripture in the ways already mentioned, it reduces the biblical covenants down to the debated promise of Genesis 3:15. The [true] expansion seen in the covenants (with all their categorical statements) is deflated into a single sound bite of “the Promised Seed-Redeemer has now come and all is fulfilled in Him.” **This casts aspersions on God as a communicator and as a covenant-Maker, since there was absolutely no need for God to say many of the things He said in the OT** [emphasis mine], let alone bind himself by oaths to fulfill them (a la Jer. 31 & 33).³⁴

As emphasised above, how one views language (and the role it plays in the transmission of divine revelation) will significantly impact one's interpretive methodology. While some of the propositions of Donaldson's rationale may seem logically appealing, they share little (if any) affinity with the Scriptures used to support them. At times, Donaldson reads into the text ideas that simply aren't warranted. For example, Jesus is said to be, “assuming Israel's identity” by referring to Himself as the light of the world in John 8:12 (cf. Israel in Isaiah 46:2).³⁵

Donaldson briefly deals with Paul's Olive Tree illustration, as he continues to try and prove that Israel equals the Church.³⁶ He assumes that Israel, as a corporate, ethnic entity, is identified as the *tree*; hence anything grafted into the tree is Israel. However, it would appear that in Paul's illustration Israel is represented by the *natural branches*. The tree then would be the place of blessing, rooted in the promises of the Abrahamic covenant. While Donaldson rightly points out that the tree cannot be the Church, as the illustration would then teach that one could lose their salvation, his understanding of Israel (and her Covenant promises) being *metaphorically* fulfilled in Christ, still ultimately winds up characterizing the illustration as *soteriological* in nature.³⁷ This view remains problematic given that branches could yet be removed (v.21 & 22). Regarding the promises of the Abrahamic covenant (land, seed, and blessing), dispensationalists *do* understand that these will be ultimately procured in Christ; it's just that they will be so literally, not metaphorically.

It would have been helpful if Donaldson had interacted with verse 16 of Romans 11 which, in drawing from the OT doctrine of first-fruits consecration, states that the branches are holy, that is set apart to God, *prior* to them being cut from the tree. This means that both believing *and unbelieving* Jews, constituting Israel, are set apart to God for His *purposes*. Given that this is so throughout history, and right down to the present day, it is dishonest to suggest that the modern state of Israel is nothing more than an insignificant, by-product of history, bearing naught on biblical theology. Israel remains the apple of His eye.

Rounding out the chapter, Donaldson returns to the ethical maxim regarding 'doctrine and fruit' citing (seemingly in a feeble attempt to tar and feather dispensationalists) The Kairos Palestine 2009 Document which bizarrely states,

In face of those who use the Bible to threaten our existence as Christians and Muslim Palestinians, we renew our faith in God because we know that the word of God can not be the source of our destruction.³⁸

Other than implying that YHWH and Allah are both one and the same (or at least on equal footing), the above notion is really a moral inversion of sorts, especially when one considers that it is the Muslim 'word of god' that is *quite literally* the source of destruction for Christians all over the Middle East.

Chapter Three: The Kingdom of God

In reading through the third chapter the validity of the claim by dispensationalists that, "we read their stuff but they never read ours", soon became apparent. Regarding Jesus' offer of the Messianic Kingdom to Israel, Donaldson writes,

Had Israel accepted Jesus' "bona fide" kingdom offer and thereby receiving the full realization of the nation's hopes, it follows that Jesus would have been crowned as their king; they would have not had him crucified.³⁹

But, as dispensationalists have pointed out, this is like saying, "had Adam accepted God's bona fide offer of eternal life and not sinned, then there would be no need for the cross". Dispensationalists understand that the offer of the Kingdom to Israel was contingent upon their acceptance of Jesus as their Messiah – you don't accept the Messianic King, you don't get the Kingdom. What's more, Donaldson's deduction is pointless considering that the lamb was slain before the foundation of the world. His logical conclusion neglects the fact that God has a sovereign plan for mortal history that includes the interplay of true moral choice among men. Charlie Clough illustrates the issue well, in the context of Noah's preaching, saying,

Noah preached, for example, for men to repent; had they done so, however, their action would have made the plans for the Ark too small. Think about that for a while. For 120 years Noah is building the ark. For 120 years he's preaching. Suppose there was a revival, now what does he do with the plans for the ark? Then was that invitation legitimate? Yes it was, because God had history planned such that that revival wouldn't happen.⁴⁰

Donaldson rehashes the oft-refuted claim that a crucial aspect of the dispensational understanding of the Kingdom, is a bifurcation between the terms 'Kingdom of God' and the 'Kingdom of Heaven'.⁴¹ This was Scofield's mistake; the majority of dispensationalists today reject this view, understanding that the two terms are synonymous.

Before launching into a non-dispensational view of the Kingdom, Donaldson reiterates the hermeneutical framework or 'interpretive criteria' that one must adhere to, if the non-dispensational view is to gain any cognitive traction. His propositions rely heavily on his typological reading of Scripture (which presupposes the Covenant of Grace). To which end, the progressive nature of the Bible is said to demand a "rereading of the Old Testament in light of the New Testament".⁴² Commitment to this view, allows one to easily reinterpret the OT promises as meaning something other than what is plainly stated. The implication that progressive revelation can annul the unconditional promises of the OT is fraught with problems. What then, are we to make of God's promise that, "Never again will the waters become a flood to destroy all life"? Perhaps Donaldson's interpretive criteria only apply to the promises made to Israel... What's more, Donaldson has thus far failed to provide Scriptural justification for reversing the determinative/dependent relationship between the Old and New Testaments. In highlighting the problems created by this theological inversion, Sam A. Smith writes,

.... the basis for the acceptance of the New Testament books as inspired documents was that they teach (at face value) the same doctrines as the Old Testament—but how can that be if the Old Testament must be allegorized to conform to the teachings of the New Testament?⁴³

Donaldson's approach manifests as a circular fallacy by which the interpretative authority of the NT (over the OT) ultimately draws the basis for its validity from the authority of the OT!

As is common in a non-dispensational approach to biblical theology, this idea of a reversed-testament exegetical authority is said to be evident in (and hence justified by) the way the NT writers used the OT in their writings. Donaldson asserts that the NT writers "consistently model the validity of this approach".⁴⁴ Actually, it would seem that they do nothing of the sort. What they do model, in their careful usage of the NT, is the validity of an OT Messianic theology.⁴⁵ What Donaldson is implying, but has yet to demonstrate from Scripture, is that the NT writers used his typological hermeneutic in their handling of the OT. Donaldson fails to consider the Jewish worldview held by the writers of Scripture, and assumes an overly Gentilic method of exegesis. Simply claiming a singular, standard OT usage in the NT, in order to justify theological presuppositions is hardly scholarly behavior. Concerning NT writer

usage of the OT, David L. Cooper noted that there is one of each of *four* categories of NT usage utilized by Matthew in his gospel account.⁴⁶

Having established the required interpretative criteria, Donaldson moves into a non-dispensational understanding of the kingdom. The logical sequence is fairly easy to follow: OT must be reinterpreted by the NT, NT kingdom concepts (as found primarily in the gospels) “fulfill” any-and-all OT concepts, OT *physical* kingdom must be understood as being the NT *spiritual* kingdom: ipso facto, no physical kingdom as per dispensationalism; essentially “spiritual” kingdom as per Amillennial Covenant Theology.

There is not much of substance in the remainder of the chapter, and most of the arguments that Donaldson presents for his non-dispensational understanding, are built on the assumption that dispensationalists don’t recognize a multi-faceted kingdom program. What he does demonstrate rather neatly, is the reductionism inherent to his understanding of the kingdom and Covenant Theology in general. If all OT physical kingdom concepts are reduced to the spiritual concepts of the gospels, then what do we make of Revelation teaching the same physical kingdom concepts of the OT? **Donaldson’s answer would** simply be to run these teachings through his genre-dependent, typological hermeneutic so that they conform to his theological presuppositions.

Chapter Four: The Rapture and the Tribulation

For anti-pretribulationists, no discussion of the rapture is complete without a lament of the often over-exaggerated influence that Tim LaHaye and Jerry B. Jenkins have had on evangelical Christians, through their popular *Left Behind* series of books. Donaldson begins his discussion in chapter four no differently. He attempts to discredit the pre-trib rapture by attributing its origins to the prophetic utterances of a girl named Margaret McDonald; claiming that this is where J. N. Darby got his position from. This claim stems primarily from the work of two men: John Bray and Dave MacPherson. MacPherson’s work has been called into question because of the lack of supporting evidence. F. F. Bruce (who did not hold to the pre-trib rapture position), in commenting on the validity of MacPherson’s thesis, wrote,

Where did he [Darby] get it? The reviewers answer would be that it was in the air in the 1820s and 1830s among eager students of unfulfilled prophecy... ..direct dependence by Darby on Margaret MacDonald is unlikely.⁴⁷

In his study on the origins of Darby’s pretribulationism, Tommy Ice notes that Darby appears to have formed the basis for his position, from intense bible study and eschatological discussion with other, generally futurist-position Christians, towards the end of 1828. This is two years *prior* to when Darby is claimed to have been influenced by the utterances of

Margaret McDonald.⁴⁸ Furthermore, Ice has documented several pre-trib rapture references that pre-date Darby. One of these comes from the research of Francis X. Gumerlock (another non-pre-trib scholar) who, in analysing a text called, *'The History of Brother Dolcino'*, notes that,

...some Christians in the Middle Ages held a view of the rapture that had basic elements of what we call today a pre-tribulational rapture.⁴⁹

Overall, Donaldson's refutation of the pre-trib rapture relies heavily on his caricature of dispensationalism and several straw-man arguments concerning the role of the rapture in dispensational eschatology. Predictably, as he moves into his 'non-dispensational rapture of the church', he restates the key theological presupposition(s) that his readers must adhere to in order for his assertions to have any credibility. His metaphorical-come-mystical consummative view of Jesus is said to permit, 'a nonliteralistic interpretation of its [OT] story and promises...'⁵⁰ Statements like this make it hard to take seriously a book that is meant to be, *'a scholarly critique of popular misconceptions'*.

Turning to the Tribulation, Donaldson begins his discussion of the eschatological doctrine presented in the books of Daniel and Matthew, by declaring that he needn't concern himself with the (oft debated) role of literary genre in the interpretation of passages from these books. Yet a few pages later he chides dispensationalists for not taking into consideration the 'nature of apocalyptic genre', as he does, when interpreting Daniel and Matthew! Donaldson launches into his critique of a dispensational understanding of Daniel 9:24-27 and once again ends up misrepresenting the position. As he develops his arguments, he seems to ignore the opening words of verse 24 which state,

Seventy weeks are declared for **your people** and **your holy city** [emphasis mine]...⁵¹

Clearly what's to follow in the remainder of verse 24 through 27, relates specifically to *Israel* and the city of *Jerusalem*. This fact fails to loom large in Donaldson's handling of the text and subsequently, he glosses over plainly stated, key details that if examined would militate against the arguments he presents for his non-dispensational view. He implies that the dispensational treatment of Daniel's vision requires Jesus to return so that he can finish dealing with sin's universal penalty. This is a serious charge and a gross misrepresentation of how dispensationalists understand the vision. The relationship of Jesus to the events in Daniel 9:24-27 has to do primarily with God's relationship with *national Israel* (as verse 24 plainly states), therefore, the work of finishing the transgression, putting an end to sin, atoning for iniquity, and bringing in everlasting righteousness, is in accord with Israel's promised, future, national salvation and restoration (cf. Jeremiah 31:34, Romans 11:27).

In the vein of Amillennial Preterism, Donaldson has much to say about the events of Daniel's vision being fulfilled in Jesus' first coming and the destruction of Jerusalem in 70A.D, yet he fails to deal with the identification of the prince who is to come and the one 'seven' covenant of verse 27. Donaldson wants what is prophesied in verse 26 to be fulfilled literally in the events of 70A.D, but is at a loss as to what events fulfilled the one 'seven' covenant. His treatment of Matthew 24 is similar to that of Daniel 9, amounting to little more than a desperate plug for complete genre-override at the expense of plain-sense, literal interpretation.

Closing out the chapter, Donaldson deals with a key rapture passage, 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18. Unfortunately he fails to offer any real exegesis of the text, contenting himself with an argument against the common rapturist view that focuses on the Greek word *apantēsin* ("to meet"). Kevin D. Zuber has demonstrated that Donaldson's approach amounts to what D. A. Carson called, "the fallacy of false assumptions about technical meaning"⁵². Donaldson appeals to the use of *apantēsin* in the Parable of the Ten Virgins, attempting to strengthen his argument, but ends up neglecting the context in which the word is used. What's more, he assumes that the place the bridesmaids went out from is the place that the bridegroom is going to; however there is nothing in the text that indicates this.

Chapter Five: The Millennium

Chapter four is perhaps the most disappointing of the book. Donaldson's complete dismissal of OT eschatology is frustrating for the reader who wants a discussion of something other than tired, straw-man arguments concerning the book of Revelation. He's forced to admit that there is a, "myriad of so-called unfulfilled Old Testament prophecies..."⁵³, but none are discussed, and typically, such promises and prophecies are said to be mystically fulfilled in Christ. In his treatment of select portions of Revelation, genre and 'symbolic form' reign supreme while consistent, plain-sense, literal interpretation is considered a tool of the unbiblical. The dispensational millennium, a time period during which Israel will receive her covenanted promises, is said by Donaldson to be,

...never in any way or form mentioned by any other New Testament writer...⁵⁴

Yet in Acts 3:19-21, Peter reaffirms the OT eschatology held by his *Jewish* listeners. Furthermore, in Romans 9, Paul states that the *covenants* and *promises* still belong to the people of Israel; covenants and promises that envision a redeemed and restored nation, ruled over by their King Messiah as they dwell peacefully in their promised land. Interestingly, in discussing Revelation 20:1, Donaldson makes the comment that,

It is essential to observe that the primary meaning of the opening *kai* of Revelation 20:1 means “and”...⁵⁵

I see. It turns out that the primary meaning of *kai* can be used, but only when it serves one's theological presuppositions...

Chapter Six: Earthing Our Eschatology

The final chapter of the book is a recap of the arguments presented against the dispensational position, and a chance for Donaldson to promote his non-dispensational view of personal eschatology and worldview. Overall, the position that Donaldson puts forward, is relatively consistent with how dispensational Christians would answer the question, “how then shall we live?” Indeed, there are points in the chapter that dispensationalists could agree with. The problem is that the dispensationalism that Donaldson pits his view against is a more mutated Scofieldism than biblical dispensationalism; it is therefore, difficult to take his considerations seriously.

Ironically, Donaldson argues for his view of personal eschatology on the basis of a plain-sense, literal understanding of NT scripture and the foundational role that Genesis 1-11 (literally understood) plays in the formulation of a biblical worldview. He wants Christians to treat Genesis 1-11 seriously, as history, in developing their eschatology and worldview, but this necessitates that God can *actually* be taken at his word (hence trusted). Yet Donaldson has just spent most of his book arguing that God didn't really mean what he said when revealing Himself to Israel. If the god of Donaldson's non-dispensational theology cannot be taken at his *word* when it comes to the promises made to Israel, how can he be trusted to make good on his promises of salvation, glorification, and everlasting life?

He opines that the ecclesiology of dispensationalism reduces the church to the, “consequence of a great mistake” – the mistake being Israel's rejection of her Messiah-King⁵⁶. But he fails to consider that this “great mistake”, was in accordance with a sovereign God allowing mankind true moral choice, within His plan for mortal history. The consequence of the decision (in this case the Church age) is no less significant just because God allowed the decision to be made. Given Donaldson's *reductio ad absurdum* reasoning, Messiah's advent could be understood as being nothing more than the consequence of Adam's "great mistake"...

Unfortunately, chapter six amounts to little more than an attempt to cobble together every lame, oft-refuted, anti-dispensational argument in a last-ditch effort to disprove the position. According to Donaldson, dispensational Christians are passive, disengaged, escapist, who don't participate in “people/earth caring” activities. Dispensational Christians involved in

world missions, bible translation work, gospel proclamation, and creation stewardship apparently didn't get the be-passive-and-disengaged memo. What's more, referring to dispensationalists as escapists doesn't discredit the pre-trib rapture (a significant plank to the reasoning employed in chapter four). It's like referring to Christians who believe in deliverance from Hell as such, in an attempt to discredit God's plan of salvation!

Rounding out the chapter, and his assemblage of poor reasons for abandoning dispensationalism (it's escapist, fatalistic, and defeatist), Donaldson offers "A Comprehensive Eschatological Worldview" (more a plug for Christian Reconstructionism) in which dispensationalists are accused of being (once more...) escapists who don't believe in the new heavens and earth, and believe that matter is evil. It's a bizarre note to go out on and one that will probably leave dispensationalists scratching their heads, wondering, "Is he serious?"

In conclusion, I found *'the last days of dispensationalism'* to be more image than substance. It was not the 'scholarly critique' I had hoped for, but the polemical ranting of an anti-Israeli supersessionist. It's laughable to suggest - as the title to the book so proudly does - that this collection of pseudo-biblical, theo-political sound bites has sounded the death knell for biblical dispensationalism. In reality, Donaldson's 'non-dispensational', or perhaps more correctly 'anti-dispensational', theology is reminiscent of the clothes worn by Hans Christian Andersen's fictitious emperor. While Donaldson's book will probably not have its intended effect, I do fear that the Neo-supersessionist approach to theology it promotes, is fast becoming popular with those attending Laidlaw College, and sadly, many Christians throughout New Zealand: Christians, who, bereft of any sound, biblical teaching and assimilated doctrine, appear all too happy to play along with the emperor's pretense instead of crying "ruse".

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19. Henebury, P. (2012). *Rules of Affinity*. Online at: <http://drreluctant.wordpress.com/2012/04/03/rules-of-affinity/>
20. Donaldson, pp. 33
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51. Culver, R. D. (1954). *The Prophecy of the Seventy Weeks Daniel 9:24-27*. In, *Daniel and the Latter Days*. Online at: <http://rediscoveringthebible.com/Culverchap7.pdf>

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53. Donaldson, pp. 130.

54. Donaldson, pp. 133.

55. Donaldson, pp. 135.

56. Donaldson, pp. 149.