

**Systematic Theology for the Local Church**  
**#8—Interpreting the Bible—Part VII<sup>1</sup>**  
**Presuppositions and Forced Interpretation**

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In previous studies we have stressed the need to allow the text of the Bible to speak for itself, to apply to Scripture the same approach that we use in everyday communication—where we look for all the clues in messages. In doing theology we must continually look for more information. We always face the danger of stopping too soon. Sometimes when we stop too soon and don't allow evidence to speak we are acting on presuppositions, conclusions that we bring to new evidence without allowing it to speak. Then our theological conclusions will be wrong.

### **Examples from history**

The history of biblical interpretation provides examples of where presuppositions lead. In the first half of the nineteenth century, David Friedrich Strauss approached the New Testament text with the presupposition that God would not enter into human affairs, much less perform miracles. Hence he had to devise an alternative to explain the recorded ministry of Christ. The result was an interpretation that viewed the New Testament as mythology.<sup>2</sup>

During the same era, Ferdinand Christian Baur's study of Pauline writings led him to conclude that the New Testament displayed a deep rift between Paul's ministry and the church at Jerusalem. Since he adopted this position, it was a logical outcome that New Testament books that did not display such a problem (including the Gospels and Acts) were to be considered the work of second-century pseudonymous writers. Later scholars have rejected his conclusions concerning such dating.<sup>3</sup>

More recently, in this century Rudolph Bultmann's approach to the New Testament involved existentialist presuppositions that determined much of what he felt the text to be saying. Interestingly enough, he set forth in writing his views on the need to attempt to be aware of one's presuppositions, although he concluded that no interpreter could ever really operate without them.<sup>4</sup>

The history of the interpretation of the book of Daniel displays a pervasive prejudice against its miraculous predictions, especially those in chs. 2, 7 and 11, where details of the Greek and Roman empires are given, along with extensive description of the inter-testamental period (ch. 11). So precise are these prophecies that many—because they presupposed that prophecies could not be valid—have been led to view the book as written in the second century as a fictional account containing historical references viewed after the fact.<sup>5</sup>

Every interpreter of Scripture comes to it with presuppositions. But an awareness that they exist and that we always need to be open to the text will take us a long way. The British theologian Graham Stanton sums this up forcefully:

The interpreter must allow his own presuppositions and his own pre-understanding to be modified or even completely reshaped by the text itself. Unless this is allowed to happen, the interpreter will be

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<sup>2</sup> F. F. Bruce, "The History of New Testament Study," in *New Testament Interpretation*, ed. I Howard Marshall (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977), 40.

<sup>3</sup> Bruce, 42, 43.

<sup>4</sup> Graham N. Stanton, "Presuppositions in New Testament Criticism," in Marshall, 67.

<sup>5</sup> For extended discussion, see Gleason L. Archer, Jr., *A Survey of Old Testament Introduction* (Chicago: Moody, 1974), 379-403.

unable to avoid projecting his own ideas on to the text. [Interpretation] guided rigidly by pre-understanding will be able to establish only what the interpreter already knows. There must be a constant dialogue between the interpreter and the text. The hermeneutical circle is not only unavoidable but desirable. Indeed, one must go still further: the text may well shatter the interpreter's existing pre-understanding and lead him to an unexpectedly new vantage point from which he continues his scrutiny of the text. Once the text is given priority and once the interpreter ceases to erect a barrier between himself and the text, he will find that as he seeks to interpret the text, the text will, as it were, interpret him.<sup>6</sup>

### **Examples from prophetic interpretation**

In our sixth study, "Figurative Language: Be Careful When You Jump," we introduced the metaphorical methodology of the amillennialist regarding kingdom prophecies. We return to that here, adding insight gained from our discussion of theology in the seventh study, "Doing Theology: The Biblical Discovery Process."

Among evangelical interpreters views on the fulfillment of prophecy are linked to several generalized positions on the plan of God, especially that portion from the cross to the inauguration of the eternal state. These are the premillennial, amillennial and postmillennial systems. We will discuss these systems, particularly the amillennial and premillennial, as illustrations of the principles of interpretation presented so far in this series of studies.

To begin with, we should draw some distinctions. The amillennialist asserts that the Bible does not teach that there will be a physical kingdom on the earth over which Christ will reign. Hence, Israel will not experience fulfillment of the Old Testament promises of national blessing. The premillennialist believes that there will be a physical kingdom on the earth, involving the fulfillment of national promises to Israel, with Christ present as King. The postmillennialist holds that there will be an earthly kingdom, but without the visible presence of Christ. This view sees Scripture as teaching that Christ will return to earth after the kingdom has been inaugurated by human beings and has run its course. This kingdom is to be equated roughly with some period of blessing in the present age between the two advents of Christ.

How is this relevant to theology and the interpretation of figurative language? This is one area where some have stopped too soon in the process of searching Scripture and rested on their conclusions.

### **"Spiritual" interpretation**

There is an interesting history of the interpretive methodology behind the amillennial view of the plan of God. Craig Blaising describes the contrast behind what he refers to as the *spiritual vision model* and the *new creation model*:

The *spiritual vision model* of eternity emphasizes biblical texts promising that believers will see God or receive full knowledge in the future state of blessing. It notes that Paul speaks of the Christian life in terms of its heavenly orientation, and adds to this the biblical description of heaven as the dwelling place of God, as the present enthroned position of Christ, and as the destiny of the believing dead prior to their resurrection.

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<sup>6</sup> Stanton, 68.

In the spiritual vision model of eternity, heaven is the highest level of ontological reality. It is the realm of spirit as opposed to base matter. This is the destiny of the saved, who will exist in that nonearthly, spiritual place as spiritual beings engaged eternally in spiritual activity.<sup>7</sup>

The *new creation model* forms the basis for premillennialism, the view that Jesus will reign on the earth after his return.

The *new creation model* of eternal life draws on biblical texts that speak of a future everlasting kingdom, of a new earth and the renewal of life on it, of bodily resurrection . . . , of social and even political concourse among the redeemed. The new creation model expects that the ontological order and scope of eternal life is essentially continuous with that of present earthly life except for the absence of sin and death.<sup>8</sup>

Blaising shows the influence of presuppositions on the development and longevity of the spiritual vision model:

The long dominance of the spiritual vision model has conditioned the way Christians traditionally and habitually think and converse about eternal life. These ideas are already present in the mind of one who begins to research and study what the Bible teaches on the subject. In hermeneutics, this phenomenon is called *preunderstanding*—the understanding one has about a subject before researching it, or the understanding one has about what a text is probably saying before one begins to study it. The spiritual vision model functions as the preunderstanding which many Christians begin to study or investigate biblical teaching about our future hope.<sup>9</sup>

This does not mean that the spiritual vision model is wrong. Many times we find that our preunderstanding about what Scripture teaches on a subject is confirmed, deepened, and strengthened through further research and study in God's Word. But what if the preunderstanding is wrong? The problem is that we are inclined to favor our preunderstanding. In so doing, we are apt to pass over contrary signals in the text and try to harmonize something of what it says with our predisposed way of viewing it. When we are done, we may falsely declare our view as supported by the text, even bolstered by the illusion that we have grown in our understanding of the matter.<sup>10</sup>

Is it possible to correct a false preunderstanding? Of course! But it does require a willingness to submit one's convictions to reformulation by the Scriptures. It also requires a commitment to hermeneutical practices that are conducive to that reformulation rather than insulate one from it.<sup>11</sup>

The spiritual vision model can be seen as early as the writings of Origen of Alexandria in the third century and continued to grow in acceptance through the Middle Ages, even though the position of the early church was premillennial.

Ancient Christian premillennialism weakened to the point of disappearance when the spiritual vision model of eternity became dominant in the church. A future kingdom on earth simply did not fit well in an eschatology that stressed personal ascent to a spiritual realm. Furthermore, the practice of spiritual interpretation left little to support millennialism. . . . New Testament references to heaven were made to teach the spiritual vision model, and spiritual interpretation forced New Testament new

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<sup>7</sup> Craig Blaising, "Premillennialism" in *Three Views on the Millennium and Beyond*, ed. Darrell L. Bock, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1999), 161.

<sup>8</sup> Blaising, 162.

<sup>9</sup> Blaising, 164.

<sup>10</sup> Blaising, 165.

<sup>11</sup> Blaising, 165.

creation language to harmonize with it. Only the book of Revelation was left as a premillennial holdout along with certain Old Testament apocalyptic texts echoed in John's visions.<sup>12</sup>

The book of Revelation was indeed a problem for this approach to the plan of God, because taking it at face value seemed to describe a millennium that was incompatible with the spiritual vision model of the future. Dionysius, bishop of Alexandria (c. 200-c. 264), "professed that he had no idea what the book was saying."<sup>13</sup> Others attempted to exclude it from the canon altogether.<sup>14</sup> The solution that resulted in the position of modern amillennialism came from Augustine:

The other way in which the Millennium could be seen as realized in present Christian experience can be labeled the Augustinian or ecclesiastical view. In this interpretation the millennial reality was identified with the institutional church. The church now reigns with Christ and exercises power on the earth in the administration of grace.<sup>15</sup>

But Augustine's view also required a more radical reading of the book of Revelation. If the institutional church was the fulfillment of the millennial vision in Revelation 20, then the Millennium must have begun when the church first came into existence. This means that John could not have been speaking about a reality that was future to him when he recorded his vision of the millennial kingdom. Yet, it seemed undeniable that the earlier visions in John's book described real suffering and conflict, which the church had faced prior to the conversion of Constantine—and still faces as events since that time have proven. How were these observations to be reconciled?<sup>16</sup>

Blaising points out that they were reconciled by rejecting the historical sequences in the book that are presented in the narrative.<sup>17</sup> John did not intend the reader to see a sequence in the book that leads to a millennium.

### **Effects of presupposition on the place of Israel in God's plan for the ages**

In addition to the question of *where* Rev. 20 falls in God's plan, amillennialism's presuppositions affect its view of the *subjects* of the passage, i.e., the identity of those ruling with Christ in 20:4. Covenant Theologians hypothesize as an overall statement about the Bible that the purpose of God is to take out of mankind one people who will be recipients of special blessings, particularly the enjoyment of God. On the face of it, this sounds very reasonable. One result is that it does not allow for any separate track for the nation of Israel.<sup>18</sup>

For amillennialists that are also Covenant Theologians (most Presbyterians, for example) this assumption affects the interpretation of the identity of *Israel* in Rom. 11. Since God's purpose is not, in their view, to work with separate peoples through history, but rather to establish one people, there is no essential difference between Israel and the Church here, and the future of Israel does not involve national regathering, regeneration and enjoyment of the land. The land blessings, which from the Old Testament alone may reasonably be interpreted as physical, earthly and visible, are viewed by the amillennialist as absorbed by the Church, part of the same people as Israel. Thus, the land and other promises were supposedly never meant to be fulfilled physically.

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<sup>12</sup> Blaising, 170.

<sup>13</sup> Blaising, 170.

<sup>14</sup> Blaising, 170.

<sup>15</sup> Blaising, 172.

<sup>16</sup> Blaising, 173.

<sup>17</sup> Blaising, 173.

<sup>18</sup> See my article "Understanding Covenant Theologians: A Study in Presuppositions," *Grace Theological Journal*, Fall 1989.

This presupposition about the one people of God also comes into play in the interpretation of Rev. 20. Since there cannot be a time of national blessing for Israel on earth during a kingdom, the ruling of Rev. 20 cannot refer to a re-gathered and resurrected remnant of Israel. So, the time of this 1000-year period is equated with the Church age, and the subjects in this kingdom are Christians today.

Now here is where our study on figurative interpretation comes in, as well as the absolute need to allow the whole Bible, with all its parts, to speak. The amillennialist is forced to take many parts of the Bible figuratively, in that “startling” way, because his interpretation of individual portions is prejudiced by his theology, his overall explanation. He comes to Rev. 20:1-7, which teaches about a time of rule by Christ, and views it as figurative, as something other than a 1000-year period on earth. He simply sees it as metaphorical for “Church Age” In the light of the whole passage, this view is very weak, for it makes the 1000-year description bear too much weight, taking it as figurative, that is, in the unexpected sense in relation to the context. This is strange, to say the least, especially since *thousand* is mentioned six times, in several different connections! We must underscore the fact that we are all in danger of imposing our own views upon the Bible at any points. But consistently interpreting in this way betrays a flaw in one’s approach to the Bible. Hypothesis has been given primacy over the words of the text of the Bible. What one writer calls “forced” exegesis has taken the place of the “normal.”<sup>19</sup>

Since we are suggesting that the process of biblical interpretation should be similar to that employed in interpreting any written or oral message, we should point out that the amillennial approach to Rev. 20 falls prey to two errors. First, it fails to maximize the contribution of the various parts of the message in that it views without warrant different statements or words as saying the same thing: e.g., Israel and the Church are often taken as synonymous in the New Testament. Further, many prophecies in the Old Testament that speak of Israel’s future blessings in the kingdom are taken as describing a spiritual state during the present age, and actually have little meaning at all. They can almost be dismissed.

Secondly, this approach over-invokes the switch to the unexpected meaning in that it sees figures too easily, when the surrounding words do not suggest the need for such a switch. In the same passage the amillennialist is once again obligated a second time by his system to switch to the less expected meaning. In Rev. 20:4-5 the text speaks of a living or coming to life. This is predicated of two groups. The normal, expected manner of interpreting these would be to take them to refer to physical resurrection, especially since one’s normal expectation in reading this text with its description of ruling would be to take the living to be exiting from the grave, that is, being resurrected bodily, as described in so many other places in the Bible. But the amillennialist takes the “first resurrection” to refer to the new birth of individuals, since it occurs in connection with the 1000 years, which for him, of course, is a nebulous period of time, somehow to be connected with the present age (the “after” is a problem for him, too; how can something happen after an unknown period of time?). And the other resurrection applies for him (and this is in keeping with the sense of the passage) to the resurrection of the unsaved of all ages at the close of time as we know it.

Over a hundred years ago Henry Alford said of this interpretation:

If in such a passage the first resurrection may be understood to mean *spiritual* rising with Christ, while the second means *literal* rising from the grave;—then there is an end of all significance in language, and Scripture is wiped out as a definite testimony to any thing. If the first resurrection is spiritual, then so is the second, which I suppose none will be hardy enough to maintain: but if the second is literal, then so is the first, which in common with the whole primitive Church and many of the best modern expositors, I do maintain and receive as an article of faith and hope.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Kenneth L. Barker, “False Dichotomies Between the Testaments,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 25 (1982):35.

<sup>20</sup> Henry Alford, *The Greek Testament*, 4 vols. (London: Longmans, Green, 1894) 4:732-33.

Alford is pointing out in a very eloquent way that the amillennialist shifts *strangely* to a metaphorical interpretation in order to maintain his position. A. Berkeley Mickelsen underscores the need for systematic evaluation of figurative language:

The literal meaning—the customary and socially acknowledged meaning which carries with it the ideas of actual and earthly—must become the base for figurative meanings. Upon this base they depend. If an interpreter declares that a certain expression is figurative, he must give reasons for assigning a figurative meaning. These reasons must rise from an objective study of all factors and must show why the figurative meaning is needed. Sometimes interpreters insist that elements are figurative because their system of eschatology requires it, not because the Scriptures and objective factors demand it. . . . Where there are compelling grounds for figurative meanings, they could be adopted. A careful interpreter will interpret both literally and figuratively because the passage he is interpreting demands these procedures.<sup>21</sup>

While we all must be careful of weak points in our armor, any approach to the Bible worthy of consideration must allow all the parts to speak for themselves and yet not allow contradictions, all the while treating the Bible as we would any message whose parts must be measured against each other to achieve a comprehensive understanding of what the author/speaker intended. This is a key feature of sound interpretation.

### Study Questions

1. Attempt to identify some presuppositions you yourself have now or have had about the following (they may be helpful or misleading). Be sure that you are stating presuppositions, not just opinions or feelings. For example:

Saving money.

Presupposition: Saving money is always worthwhile. *or* Saving money builds good countries.

Opinion or feeling: I have trouble saving money.

- a. Men: being married
- b. Women: being married
- c. Being a parent
- d. Being an adult
- e. Training children
- f. Shopping at large malls
- g. Shopping at Home Depot
- h. Shopping at WalMart
- i. Driving in the Philadelphia area
- j. Working on one's yard
- k. Studying biblical Greek
- l. Studying systematic theology

2. For each of the above, have you had to change or abandon your presupposition when faced by facts? Please describe.

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<sup>21</sup> Mickelsen, 304-5; Ramm, 206.