

Michael J. Vlach. *Dispensational Hermeneutics: Interpretation Principles That Guide Dispensationalism's Understanding of the Bible's Storyline*. N.p.: Theological Studies, 2023. 111pp.

Michael Vlach's *Dispensational Hermeneutics* provides a highly readable primer on the core principles of interpretation that *distinguish* dispensationalism from its theological alternatives. All orthodox systems of theology concur on certain foundational theological and hermeneutical points. These areas of commonality are not the focus of this book. Instead, *Dispensational Hermeneutics* surveys the interpretive concepts of normalcy, consistency, integrity, and induction that lead to dispensational theology. Vlach captures and describes the essential points of conflict between dispensationalism and alternative theological systems while maintaining a resolute but irenic tone. He demonstrates hermeneutical consensus among dispensationalists by referencing credible dispensational academics like Craig Blaising, Darrell Bock, John Feinberg, Paul Feinberg, Elliott Johnson, Robert Saucy, Mark Snoeberger, Paul Tan, and Mark Yarbrough in outlining ten key principles of dispensational interpretation.

The first chapter treats the *theological* commitments of dispensationalists that are distinct from alternative systems of theology. These set the stage for the interpretive principles that follow in later chapters. These theological commitments include a recognition of “the necessity and centrality of a mediatorial earthly kingdom of God” (12); a “focus on the biblical covenants and all their dimensions” (13); the “continuing significance of ethnic/national Israel” (16); the “distinction between Israel and the Church” (18); the “continuing significance of geo-political nations” (19); and “Premillennialism” (20). Every one of these theological commitments derives from normal, consistent, inductive hermeneutics. To arrive at a different theological conclusion, one must replace normal interpretive principles with special interpretive principles, consistent principles with inconsistent principles, or inductive principles with deductive principles. Dispensationalists defend the nature of Scripture as *different* from any other work of literature in certain respects—having God as its author (inspiration), absolute truth as its quality (inerrancy), and a simultaneous record of God's work through the ages and his plan for the future as its content—but dispensationalists also defend the nature of Scripture as *the same as* other works of literature in other respects—having human authors and readers with human limitations as an audience.

Chapter 2 explains dispensationalism's first three interpretive principles. First, dispensationalists maintain a “consistent use grammatical-historical hermeneutics” throughout all of Scripture regardless of biblical genre (23). Vlach shows how adherents of alternative theological systems tend to follow the grammatical-historical method in their handling of *most* scriptural texts while jettisoning this method in favor of a symbolic hermeneutic in regard to prophecy. Admittedly, they *must* do so in order to justify several theological precommitments. A grammatical-historical interpretation of prophecy leads to a theological outcome similar to dispensationalism. Vlach shows the connection between grammatical-historical and literal interpretation, and he indicates how the use of figures of speech (including symbols and types) is consistent with literal interpretation. He shows how—contrary to claims by dispensationalism's hermeneutical opponents—a literal hermeneutic is necessary to prove Jesus is the Messiah. Jesus would not be recognizable had he not fulfilled hundreds of OT prophecies

regarding his birth, ministry, and death literally. Next, dispensationalists insist on a “consistent contextual interpretation of OT prophecies” (32). This principle intersects integrity because to supplant the grammatical, historical, and contextual meaning with a meaning wholly foreign to what was actually spoken calls into question the integrity of the author. Vlach draws specific attention to “the ethical nature of promises and covenants” (34). Given the necessity of fulfilling a covenant in exactly the terms in which it was given, the reader wonders if theologians who advocate certain alternative systems would feel ill-used if they signed a contract with a mechanic to have their car fixed only to have the mechanic tell them he satisfied the contract by fixing a differing person’s house. If God can promise Israel a physical, geographically bounded land but mean that the Church will experience spiritual salvation, then the very essence of truth is shaken. The chapter concludes by clarifying the concept of *testament priority*. While some theologians emphasize “New Testament Priority”—by which they mean that they are the arbiters of what NT ideas to read back into the OT, what promises are to be reinterpreted, and what concepts are to be wholly reimagined in terms foreign to the original—dispensationalists defend “Passage Priority.” Vlach describes this simply as “the meaning of any Bible passage is found in that passage” (35). Later passages can add information or clarity, but they never contradict, undermine the meaning of, or reimagine the earlier text in a way that transforms its meaning.

In chapter 3 Vlach expands the interpretive principles of dispensationalism in the direction of integrity by articulating four concepts: “Old Testament prophecies not repeated in the New Testament remain relevant” (40); “Old Testament eschatology expectations are reaffirmed in the New Testament” (43); “Progress of revelation does not cancel or transform unconditional promises to the original audience” (50); and “Fulfillments occur with the two comings of Jesus” (53). Every one of these principles advocates an understanding of what constitutes truth and integrity based on the Scriptures themselves as well as common human experience. That is, Vlach shows that dispensationalists did not invent these interpretive principles in order to substantiate a theological system. Rather, these principles derive from the nature of truth itself and find further warrant in human experience. Far from repudiating, reinventing, reimagining, or reinterpreting the OT, the NT simply shows that the OT properly and correctly predicts both the spiritual and physical promises that relate to Christ’s two comings. It is not, then, truly spiritual to do away with the clear historical meaning of the OT in favor of the NT.

Chapter 4 presents three principles of interpretation that relate to the complexity of interpreting OT events and prophecies. These include the existence of “partial fulfillments of Old Testament prophecies” (57); “Jesus as means of fulfillment of the Old Testament” (61); and “Types, yes! Typological interpretation, no!” (71). Each of these principles demonstrates that the spiritual emphasis of the New Testament does not replace the Old, nor does the apparent fulfillment of only certain spiritual aspects of OT prophecies warrant reinterpreting the rest of the prophecy as symbolic. There is strong evidence from Jesus’ quotation of Isaiah 61 in Luke 4:18–19 that Jesus understood his first coming was to fulfill only part of the aggregated prophecies of the OT. There is, then, simply no need for theologians to absorb or dismiss the physical promises to Israel by assigning them to alternative symbolic realities.

Chapters 5 and 6 parallel the previous chapters by exploring what other theological systems claim as key interpretive principles that differentiate those systems from dispensationalism. These principles tend to be deduced from a theological examination of the NT evidence regarding the Church coupled with the assumption (which dispensationalists find unwarranted) that Israel either is *replaced* by the Church or *is* the Church. Once theologians deduce these principles, they read them back into the OT. Vlach argues that “there are no examples where a New Testament passage overrides the original meaning of an Old Testament text” as understood by grammatical-historical interpretation (79). Thus, he contends that the deductions that theologians have made are actually founded on air. They stem less from Scripture than from external human assumptions about Scripture. “New Testament Priority” is an assertion and an illusion, and it can even be made to sound very spiritual and sophisticated, but it does not square with biblical reality.

Some of the strongest divergences among conservative theologians stem from competing hermeneutical views. Dispensationalists insist on normalcy, consistency, integrity, and induction as core interpretive principles in reading Scripture. These principles work from the text to the system—they reflect normal communication. Competing systems tend to require interpretive irregularity, inconsistency, a radical reimagining of what was written, and deduction based on axioms within the system. *Dispensational Hermeneutics* does not claim that the “right hermeneutic” can be settled conclusively, but it does offer the reader a clearer understanding of how dispensationalists arrive at their theological conclusions.

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