

Irwin, Brian P., and Tim Perry. *After Dispensationalism: Reading the Bible for the End of the World*. Bellingham, WA: Lexham, 2023. 297pp. + 23pp. (front matter) + 107pp. (back matter).

In *After Dispensationalism*, Irwin and Perry suggest that three distinct areas of study—church history, ancient Near East (ANE) culture and hermeneutics, and biblical theology and exposition—combine to influence modern popular beliefs about the end times. Part I presents an essentially historical survey of end-times beliefs from the early church to the present, from the sensational to the staid, and from the unsystematic to the heavily systematized. This section addresses everything from doomsday cults to standard orthodox views, and it strolls through history, theological beliefs, and an explanation of the distinctives of dispensationalism. Part II shifts to ANE culture. It argues the authors' positions on genres and hermeneutics and asserts that dispensationalism blends prophecy and apocalypse. Part III purports to expound the meaning of apocalypses in the Scriptures.

The authors do not clearly identify their own theological position, but the reader gleans the following from the tenor of the text. (1) They admit the value of dispensationalism as a catalyst for serious Bible study, as an impetus for significant evangelistic and missionary activity, and as an encouragement to serious theological application of Scripture to life, while mischaracterizing it as essentially provincial, unscholarly, and hermeneutically ignorant. (2) They seem to hold eclectic views on prophecy—blending futurism, preterism, and idealism. (3) They seem to wish to be viewed as conservative evangelicals, given their insistence on the authority of Scripture; however, their acceptance of a second-century date for Daniel (the book was not written by Daniel, who was not demonstrably a prophet, and the book has no *prophetic* value; 159, 162–63) and their ready acceptance of the assertions of liberal scholars in regard to the nature, type, and prevalence of apocalypse, the integrity of Isaiah, and the integrity of the Pentateuch give the reader pause. Additional research shows that one author is an Anglican priest and the other teaches at a liberal seminary—both in Canada.

In spite of the book's forty-three pages of endnotes and thirty-four-page bibliography, the reader will observe that it exhibits an almost studied refusal to engage dispensational academics of the past forty years. Thus, the book feels incredibly dated—as though the writers are sparring with theologians and a theological system from the nineteenth century instead of their theological and academic peers. *After Dispensationalism* characterizes dispensationalism by its fringe representatives (like Harold Camping) and avoids substantive research in the realm of actual dispensational thought. All conservative theological systems suffer the infelicity that if they are to be characterized by their oddest and least orthodox representatives, they can be construed as nearly heterodox. To proffer a purported answer to current dispensationalism by engaging only old and extreme representatives (and even these on a superficial level) disappoints.

The book itself is difficult to classify. Is it supposed to be historical? If so, the reader will be puzzled that it overlooks crucial facts of church history, especially those that touch the pronounced chiliasm (an early and unsystematized form of premillennialism) of the early church. Readers will also be surprised to learn from the authors (contra 2 Kgs 25:7) that Nebuchadnezzar killed King Zedekiah (the biblical text explicitly says that Nebuchadnezzar kept him alive).

Is *After Dispensationalism* supposed to be theological? If so, the reader will wonder at demonstrably false statements such as, “In almost all cases, biblical prophecies were *fulfilled during the lifetime of the original audience*” (27, emphasis original). Perhaps the writers have merely forgotten the protoevangelium, the hundreds of specific prophecies concerning the coming of Messiah, or the hundreds of prophecies not yet fulfilled regarding Israel’s restoration, but to assert or imply that prophecy is (nearly) always short-range is, itself, short-sighted. Similarly, the authors *frequently* repeat the theologically odd dictum that unless prophecies were fulfilled in the days of the original audience, then it had no meaning for them (158).¹ Adam and Eve would be shocked to discover that the promise of a Descendant who would reverse the curse had no value for them since he would not appear for another four thousand years. King David must have been profoundly ignorant of the assured results of such modern scholarship to mistake the Messianic prophecies of the Psalms as having any value of encouragement or blessing for himself. It would seem that the authors of *After Dispensationalism* overlook the fact that the value of Scripture prophecy stems not from fulfillment in the lifetimes of the immediate listeners, but from divine intent.

While quite willing to entertain the unfounded assertions of theological liberals, the authors take shots at fundamentalism in ways that have no bearing on the argument (e.g., 33–34). They make historically specious claims (e.g., that fundamentalists refused to cooperate across denominational lines—a fact provably false in that fundamentalist schools of the 1940s frequently represented nearly fifty denominations simultaneously) (35).

The book asserts that “pseudonymity is a literary strategy that was common in the ancient world” and “that ancient authors used pseudonymity not to claim authority through deception, but to serve the overall message through a device well-known to the audience” (162–63). This statement is both exaggerated (as Metzger has demonstrated, anonymity was common; pseudonymity was not; moreover, pseudonymity was regarded as a fraud) and demonstrably false when it comes to the Scriptures. The early church was highly critical of the *falsarius*. Given the propensity of the authors to credit highly the assertions of theological liberals, perhaps their waywardness on this point is understandable.

Finally, the book offers few advances historically, theologically, or hermeneutically, especially regarding the hermeneutics of prophecy (and apocalypses). The reader will not find a summary that brings the theological conversation up to its current situation. *After Dispensationalism* omits both recent dispensational scholarship and recent studies that question the assertion that Revelation and its OT counterparts are apocalypses. It claims to offer a new thesis (that “prophecy is primarily God’s word of hope for his people”) without proving the “primarily” aspect and without recognizing that the people of God have *always* known and confessed that prophecy expresses hope. Those who enjoy reading subjective speculation on the symbols of Ezekiel, Daniel, and Revelation will find ample fodder for their imaginations in the third part of the book.

The summary theses for the book (285–95) offer mixed value. Some of the statements are clearly true (numbers 2, 3, 4, 7, 11, 12), and some need to be qualified to be true (numbers 1, 5, 6, 8, 9, 10,

¹ This is one of the demonstrably false claims of amillennialism that appears frequently in published works.

13). The authors' definition of "literal sense" assumed in the fifth thesis ("When reading apocalyptic and prophetic genres, a good reader will always read the text in its literal sense.") is so plastic as to allow any preferred reading whatsoever to be designated as literal. To them, "literal sense" equals whatever meaning *they* decree that the "original hearers or readers" held, even if that meaning is entirely symbolic and entirely the subjective assertion of the authors' own theological tradition.

Those who are determined to disagree with dispensationalism will find the book concurring with their desire. Those who are committed to the "assured results" of liberal scholarship will similarly find many rallying points. Those wishing to investigate dispensationalism more fully will be better profited by reading Vlach's *He Will Reign Forever*,² since it comes from a dispensationalist who is explaining the system from inside the camp, or perhaps the recent "views" book *Covenantal and Dispensational Theologies*.³ Dispensationalists will find *After Dispensationalism* a frequent mischaracterization of their beliefs. Interpreters who grasp the basic biblical reality of long time lapses between prediction and fulfillment will find the book's counter assertions to be both puzzling and unorthodox.

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² Michael J. Vlach, *He Will Reign Forever: A Biblical Theology of the Kingdom of God* (n.p.: Lampion, 2017).

³ Brent E. Parker and Richard J. Lucas, eds., *Covenantal and Dispensational Theologies: Four Views on the Continuity of Scripture*, Spectrum Multiview Book Series (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2022). For a review of this work, see *JBTW* 3, no. 2 (Spring 2023): 95–98.