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Dispensational Difficulties

Introduction

In our recent studies on the book of Revelation, we (David and John) approached the book believing it describes 'end-time' events. Events, that is, which are described in the OT as belonging to 'the end'. We understand Revelation to take OT prophecies and put them into the Bible's final framework of what the end involves. In our view the Bible teaches that these 'end-times', which the OT looked forward to, began at the First Coming of the Lord Jesus and will find their completion at His Second Coming. This means that while the events of the book have a specific and comprehensive fulfilment at the end of history they also refer to the whole era of the Church; the events described in Revelation have already commenced. Paul takes this perspective in II Thess. 2 when he speaks of a future anti-Christ and future lawlessness, yet says that the spirit of that lawlessness is already at work. Cf. I John 2:18; 4:3.

We also take the view that when Revelation refers to saints and prophets, etc. it is describing the Christian church - all believers from the First until the Second Coming of Christ. Again, we accept, many of the events have special meaning for the last generation of Christians. The point is, of course, the first generation of Christians believed they would likely be the last, and therefore expected the events described to be fulfilled in their lifetime. Each succeeding generation of Christians is expected to think the same way.

Dispensationalism

For people reared in Brethren churches this is an unfamiliar perspective. The understanding of prophecy generally taught is that of dispensationalism. This view takes a strictly **futurist** view of Revelation from chapter 4 onwards. It teaches that there are two stages to the Second Coming. The first stage is when Jesus comes to take the church to heaven (the rapture), and the second stage is at least seven years later when He

returns to judge the world (the revelation). During the interim there will be a time of great tribulation and persecution, specifically directed at the Jewish nation, who will turn to God and Christ through the preaching of the gospel of the kingdom, a gospel different in significant aspects from the present gospel. This persecution will also be directed at any gentiles who believe in the Messiah at this time. The majority of Revelation (from Ch4-19) dispensationalist writers say, describes only the period between the two end-time comings. The 'saints' described are not the NT church but the Jewish nation.

The impression often given is that dispensationalism is the only orthodox way to understand prophecy and if you don't interpret it this way then you must be a heretic. This is most unfair. It can easily be shown that a dispensational understanding of the Bible did not really exist until about 180 years ago when it was systematised by JND Darby, although it was first mooted by a Jesuit priest some 200 years previously. Before that, the view we take on Revelation was the most common among Bible believing Christians. Indeed today it is still the view taken by the majority of responsible commentators. If the test of orthodoxy is the antiquity of a view then dispensationalists are on a very sticky wicket.

Complicated Comings

How to understand prophecy is, of course, a very big topic, but we wish to give some rudimental reasons why we find the strictly futurist position unconvincing.

1. Revelation is silent on a pre-tribulation rapture

If 'the end-times' involve such a major event as the 'rapture' of the church before the tribulation, it is surely reasonable to expect Revelation to refer to this clearly. Yet, dispensationalists are forced to admit it does not. The only reference to the 'rapture' according to dispensationalists is in Ch 4:1. John is told, 'Come up here'. By anyone's reckoning this is at best, an obscure reference to a major prophetic event. Not only so, it is clearly a very tenuous interpretation. What evidence is there in the text that John is intended as a symbol of anything, far less a symbol of the Christian church and its rapture? It is not an at all likely interpretation.

2. The NT gives no reason to expect a two-stage Coming

More importantly, it is difficult, if not impossible, to find any reference elsewhere in the NT that clearly shows (or even, not so clearly shows) there are two stages to the Second Coming of Christ.

I (John) grew up with a dispensational understanding of the Bible. I believed implicitly for many years that this was the only possible view and even when I learned of others, strenuously rejected them. I read, fairly widely, dispensational writings to bolster my convictions. However, gradually I admitted to myself, I could not find this distinction in Scripture. Nor, I discovered, could the commentators who taught this distinction, give convincing arguments to support it. It was a distinction assumed to exist; a distinction imposed on texts rather than one which any text demanded.

Darby said he first became convinced of the distinction between the rapture and revelation when studying II Thess.2:1. Yet it is extremely difficult to find anything in this text requiring such a deduction. In fact the passage seems to lead to just the opposite conclusion. Why tell the church that the 'Day of the Lord' will not come until certain things happen if they are not going to experience these things nor the day itself? Why not simply tell them Jesus will return for them before that day?

In our opinion there are no NT texts that exegetically require a two-stage coming. It is an assumption that must be read into a text rather than a doctrine naturally read out.

The argument is sometimes advanced that while the OT does not make clear a distinction between the First and Second Coming of Jesus yet such a distinction exists and so a similarly hidden distinction may exist in the NT regarding the two stages of the Second Coming. This is a very weak argument. The NT claims for itself what the OT doesn't, namely that it is God's final and complete Word. What is often hidden in the OT is in the NT made plain.

3. The NT teaches ONE Second Coming

Equally significant is the fact that while we see no text that teaches or require a two-stage Second Coming we see many texts that demand the opposite. There are a number of texts that require **one** Second Coming to make any sense. Cf. II Thess. 1: 6-11 (*affliction (for ungodly) and rest (for believers) at one and the same time*); Lk 17:26 (*the day of entering the ark and the day of judgement are the same; the day of leaving Sodom and the day of it's destruction are the same*); Rev 11:17; I Thess. 4-13-5:11 (*this section is a unity, as 5:10, which summarises the section, makes clear. The day of the Lord will come to believers, but not 'as a thief' i.e. unexpected and unwelcome*); II Thess 2:1 (*the natural reading is that the Coming of Jesus and the day of the Lord are the same event*); Tit 2: 13 (*the blessed hope (the rapture) and the appearing in glory (the revelation) are clearly one event*). No, Scripture seems to teach one Second Coming. The burden of proof must lie firmly with those who claim otherwise.

Dubious Distinctions

Israel and the Church

Another important tenet of the dispensational system is the maintaining of a fairly rigorous distinction between ethnic Israel and the NT Church. God has, it is said, two people - his earthly people, Israel, and his heavenly people, the church. He has a separate programme planned for each. OT prophecies are understood to apply exclusively to Israel. The church, it is claimed, is not referred to in the OT. It is 'a mystery' revealed only in the new. All this seems to us basically mistaken.

The question that must be asked is, 'how do the NT writers understand and use OT prophecies'? The principles of interpretation they employ must be the ones we employ. How then do the NT writers interpret OT prophecies? How, for example, do they apply prophecies about Israel; the Temple; Jerusalem; the New Covenant; The Land; the Day of the Lord; the seed of Abraham etc ?

It is our contention that these OT prophecies are understood by the NT writers to be fulfilled in the church.

- **OT promises to Israel are understood to be fulfilled in the church.** (Cf. Roms 4: 13-18; Gal 3:6,7, 16,19,26-29; 4:28; 6:10; 6:16; Eph 2:11-19; 3:4-6; Phil 3:3; Roms 9:24-26; I Pet 1:10-12; 2 Pet 3:13; Roms 11 - gentiles grafted into the Olive tree, Israel). Christ is Abraham's seed. We are by faith 'in Christ'; therefore we too are Abraham's seed, the true Israel. Titles that are given to Israel in the OT are given to the church in the new.
- **God's temple is now and in the future the church.** Cf. Mk 13:1,2; Lk 21:5,6 (the Jerusalem temple is abandoned); Jn 4:21; 14:23; Eph 2:21,22; Acts 15:15-18; I Pet 2:5; II Cor 6: 14-16; Hebs 8-10; 4:16; Rev 21: 3,22. The temple in Jerusalem is rejected, and God's temple - where He dwells and His presence is known, is now among His people. There is no NT verse that teaches a future literal temple with reinstated sacrifices.
- **Prophecies concerning the New Jerusalem are fulfilled in the church.** Cf. Gal 4: 25-31; Eph 2:19; Hebs 11:9,10,14-16; 12:22; 13:13,14; Rev 3:12; 21:2, 10-14. Earthly Jerusalem is left desolate (Matt 23:38; Lk 19:41-44; Hebs 13:9-14) the New Jerusalem is - heavenly, the people of God and their final dwelling (Rev 21).
- **Prophecies concerning the New Covenant with Israel are fulfilled in the Church.** Cf. Lk 22:20; I Cor 11:24; II Cor 3:6; Hebs 8; 9:15; 10:14-18,29; 12:24; 13:20. The New Covenant made with Israel is the very covenant we participate in each time we break bread. This can only be so if we are the recipients of this covenant.
- **OT 'land' prophecies are inherited by the church.** Cf. Eph 1:3,10; 2:6, 12, 19; Hebs 3:11; 4:8,9; Phil 3:20; Col 3:1-2; Eph 1:10; I Pet 1:4; Hebs 11:9,10,13-16,39-40; 12:22; Rev 21:1. The land is God's promised rest. It is the realm in which God's spiritual blessings are to be found. It is the inheritance promised. It is the Kingdom over which Jesus reigns. Presently this is referred to as 'the heavenlies' which is an anticipation of the final dwelling of the church, the people of God - a new heaven and new earth.

It is clear then that the NT writers believe the church is the inheritor of the OT promises to Israel. OT prophecies are fulfilled in the experience of the

church - the NT messianic community. This is in line with the clear teaching of Jesus in John 10 where He speaks of God's intention that there will be 'one flock' and 'one Shepherd', a church made up of Jew and Gentile on an equal footing.

In fact 'the mystery' referred to in the NT (a mystery in the Bible is something hidden in the OT but now made clear in the NT) is in part that both Jew and Gentile are now on a level playing field, equally benefiting from the blessings of salvation (Eph 3:4-6). In the OT gentiles were anticipated as being converted but they were never imagined to be of equal status to a Jew. Yes, the NT anticipates that there will yet be a substantial turning to God of ethnic Israel, but it will be within the framework of the church and as a result of the preaching of the gospel (Roms 11). A serious problem with dispensationalism is that it re-erects barriers which God went to great lengths to destroy in the minds of C1 believers.

It is clear therefore that OT prophecies are frequently **spiritualised** by the NT writers (the land is 'the heavenlies', the temple is - Jesus, the people of God, and heaven) and often **universalised** (the land over which Jesus reigns is heaven and earth, not merely Palestine). It is a failure to recognise this that leads to so many problems in dispensational thinking. The Coming of Jesus, His death, resurrection, ascension, present reign, the sending of the Spirit completely transformed the NT apostles understanding of OT prophecies. It should also transform ours.

The Kingdom 'now', but 'not yet'

The Kingdom has Come

The whole understanding of the NT therefore, is, that with the Coming of Jesus, all OT prophecies have begun to be fulfilled (Lk 4:16-21; Acts 2:16-21; 15:13-19 and many others). The end-time spoken of by the OT prophets has arrived. The OT 'last days' have come. Cf. Acts 2:17-21; I Pet 1:20; I Cor 10:11; Hebs 1:1; 9:26,28; Jas 5:3).

The Kingdom of God so long anticipated is now being realised (Matt 12:25-28; Mk 10:15). In an unexpected form certainly (Matt 13), but realised nevertheless. Yes, it is only in initial form, the first fruits if you like, the first instalment of the full inheritance, but nonetheless really the kingdom.

The Kingdom is still to Come

Yet at the same time, while the Kingdom has 'come' (Matt 3:2; Jn 3:3,5; Lk 16:16; Col 1:13), it has 'still to come' (Matt 6:10; Lk 22:18). Although redemption (I Pet 1:18) has arrived, it has yet to arrive (Roms 8:28). Regeneration is now (Jn 3; Tit 3:5), but it is also future (Matt 19:28). Salvation is 'already' (Tit 2:11; 3:5), but it is also 'not yet' (Hebs 9:28; I Pet 1:5).

This 'already, but not yet' tension is one that permeates the whole of the NT. It is the proper key to understanding the NT. The 'World to Come' in Jesus and the Spirit has made a bridgehead into the present world. The 'end' has begun and it is therefore only a matter of time until every aspect of it is accomplished. That is why the NT and the book of Revelation view the Second Coming as 'near' (Rev 1:1,3; 22: 12,20; Jas 5:8; I Pet 4:7). It is probably wrong to say that first generation Christians expected the Second Coming to happen at any moment (II Thess 2; Matt 24; Lk 19:11-12; 20:9-18), but they certainly expected it within their lifetime (Matt 24:34). The Coming of the Lord was 'at hand'.

It is this perspective that we have employed in our recent studies in the book of Revelation. We believe it does most justice to the Biblical data. The dispensational understanding unfortunately does not do this and is, in our view, fundamentally flawed.