

Craig L. Blomberg and Sung Wook Chung, eds. *A Case for Historic Premillennialism: An Alternative to "Left Behind" Eschatology*. Grand Rapids: Baker, 2009. 208 pp. \$24.99 (paper). Reviewed by Erik Swanson, M.Div.

Current eschatology recognizes three views on the millennium: premillennialism, postmillennialism, and amillennialism. Premillennialism itself comes in two flavors: dispensational premillennialism (hereafter DP) and its less popular cousin, historic premillennialism (hereafter HP). HP has never dominated popular belief or academic strongholds, but the contributors to *A Case for Historic Premillennialism* seek to change that. This collection of articles, edited by Craig Blomberg and Sung Wook Chung, was written mostly by the faculty of Denver Theological Seminary, with two outside contributors. Since every branch of eschatology has “received sustained attention and developed new permutations,” these authors felt it was “past time for a new look at classic premillennialism” (xvi). Amillennialism has continued to develop. DP has continued to develop. But since the death of George Ladd in 1982, HP has not. Hence the occasion for this book—to progress the system of HP and steal some attention away from DP for itself.

How does this work fare in its goals? How do these contributors progress HP? What kind of case do they present for HP and how strong is it? How well do they critique the other millennial views, especially DP? These questions will be answered in the following critique. I will begin by surveying the more subtle purpose behind this book, followed by examining the contributors’ critique of DP. Then I will explore their case for HP followed by an overall evaluation of how well they achieved their intended purposes.

A Hidden Agenda

A Case for Historic Premillennialism has a hidden agenda. On the surface this appears to be a scholarly work written to interact with the latest exegetical and theological arguments of other millennial camps while putting forth the strongest arguments for HP. This would be a safe assumption, especially since these chapters are derived from papers read at the yearly conference titled, “The Denver Seminary Institute of Contextualized Biblical Studies” (xvi). All of the contributors hold doctorates. Yet the subtitle to this book reveals the real motivation behind and direction of this book: *An Alternative to “Left Behind” Eschatology*. Functionally, this should be the title of the book, perhaps with the words “Reaction” or “Attack” being substituted for “Alternative.”

A Case for Historic Premillennialism’s real agenda is to attack “left behind” eschatology. These authors are clearly venting their frustration with the popularity of “left behind” eschatology, which is presumably DP. They relate how they go to speak to Presbyterian or Reformed churches only to find that their members know nothing of their historic eschatology beliefs. The people only know of Lindsey, LaHaye, and Jenkins: “Today, at least at a grassroots level, one can find...many believers whose eschatology is largely or entirely determined by Hal Lindsey, Tim LaHaye, Jerry Jenkins, and other writers of similar bent” (xiv). They claim that DP is the popular, majority belief of evangelicals who are biblically illiterate. DP is represented as the view of the masses and popular culture which infiltrated society after 9/11 when Americans were willing to hear what the Bible said about end times.

Along these lines, in attacking “popular” DP, this book aims to steal away some of its popularity so that they can enjoy some popularity of their own. This is best shown through an overview of the first chapter. The opening chapter is titled “Dispensational and Historic

Premillennialism as Popular Millennialist Movements.” Here one expects to immediately find a basic definition of DP and HP, as well as some chief distinctives of these movements. Weber says, “Comparisons are difficult because these are two very different kinds of movements... This study will explain how and why” (2). However, he then goes on to define what is meant by “popular,” instead of defining either DP or HP. In fact, those definitions of DP and HP will never come. Weber then notes that there are two kinds of popular: the size of one’s following and the kind of one’s following (e.g. common folk or elite). HP is admittedly neither kind of popular. Weber next traces the history and rise of DP. He handles this material well, given that his background is in historical theology. By the beginning of the twentieth century, “Dispensationalism developed into a robust popular millennialist movement, whereas historic premillennialism did not” (15). Why is this? Why did DP win the day? He goes on to comment, “But as many historians have noticed, while they (DP) condemned the world, they also became masters of the world’s media. They knew how to write best sellers to spread the word beyond their boundaries” (17). DP, therefore, succeeded because it was able to penetrate popular culture. DP has been able to link prophecy with current events. He says, “With the Bible in one hand and the morning newspaper in the other, dispensationalist teachers have been able to make a case for their view of the world and what is going to happen next” (17). This goes on and on. Weber’s entire chapter is an ongoing complaint against the popularity of DP. It is a pity party for HP, which is the little brother no one is paying attention to. Entirely absent from the whole chapter is any form of exegetical or theological critique of DP, let alone basic definitions or distinctives of HP or DP. The best part is how Weber summarizes his critique of DP, which is quite ironic: “It is very significant that the best-selling dispensationalist books of all time are *fictionalized* accounts of the end-times scenario: no careful exegesis there, no laborious

comparisons with other alternatives, just a ripping good story told well” (21). Of course, unbeknownst to him, he has just described his own critique of DP—devoid of exegesis and no comparisons with other alternatives. And sadly, this characterizes the entire book. *A Case for Historic Premillennialism*, rather than being a truly scholarly endeavor, is a reactionary attack against popular DP. The frustrations of these authors in the popularity of DP is evident, but their reasons for rejecting DP in favor of HP are not so evident.

A Big Misunderstanding

One of the chief problems with this book is its consistent misunderstanding and misrepresentation of DP. Even though the authors give no defining statements of what DP is, their (mis)understanding of the system is obvious from their writings. In a book like this, one would expect to see a clear delineation of DP from HP. What exactly makes these two movements distinct? But the answer given in *A Case for Historic Premillennialism* is one thing, and one thing only—the rapture. DP holds to a pretribulational rapture while HP holds to a posttribulational rapture. A distinction between Israel and the church as the people of God, especially in relation to the millennium, is only hinted at. There is no direct discussion relating to the identities of Israel and the church. These authors never interact with the fact that they are posttribulational because they see the church and Israel as one people, who consequently endure the tribulation. In reality, the real issue separating DP and HP is the hermeneutics and subsequent exegesis that leads one to a distinction between Israel and the church. Pre/posttribulationalism is not the main issue at all, especially since one can be a DP and hold to a posttribulational view. But the contributors do not address these issues.

What muddies the waters is the fact that no author gives a clear and straightforward definition of either DP or HP, but nonetheless what they believe separates the two can be

discerned from the content of their writings. Some see the particular interest in DP as “its characteristic view on the relationship between the rapture and the ‘great tribulation’” (xiii). Later, Fairbairn seeks to resolve what kind of premillennialism was found in the early church—“Something akin to modern dispensational premillennialism (with a pretribulational rapture of the church) or something more like what is today called historic premillennialism (in which, among other differences, the rapture of the church comes at the end of the tribulation and is part of the single return of Christ to earth to begin the millennial kingdom)” (106). Here this author does not tell us what these “other differences” are but highlights the only difference he finds significant—the difference between pre- and posttribulationalism. Statements like these are characteristic of every chapter.

Consistently throughout this book, each author has set up artillery, tanks, and landmines on the hill of the timing of the rapture, expecting DP to die on that hill. Yet they fail to realize that the battle is on an entirely different hill altogether, leaving them unprepared and undefended for the real battle. This is why they lose, almost by default. They deal with absolutely none of the key issues truly separating DP and HP (which is only compounded by the fact that they never list these issues, or seem to have knowledge of them). They have missed the battle entirely.

Not only does this book misunderstand DP, but the authors misrepresent DP as well. They (mis)represent DP as simply a popular movement, fueled by popular culture and imagination, not backed by solid exegesis and theology. Weber says, “Perhaps, in the end, what separates the two versions of futurist premillennialism is that dispensationalists simply have a better story to tell. Laying all matters of truth aside, in a popularity contest the pretribulational rapture is always going to easily beat the posttribulational rapture” (21). This quote, which again is characteristic of the whole, shows that these authors are not really willing to interact with DP

in a scholarly fashion. They themselves aren't really concerned with what the Bible says, but rather with winning the popularity contest, as referenced in the previous section. This is backed up by the fact that a comparison of exegetical and theological arguments between DP and HP is missing from the entire book. Blomberg accuses many if not most DPs of believing in a pretribulation rapture just because they want it to be true. Posttribulationists, they say, have a hard sell because who wants to go through the tribulation? I would agree wholeheartedly with these frustrated authors in criticizing the popular DPs who make radical and baseless predictions of the future. However, if these men want their case for HP to be taken seriously, they have to rightly represent DP and then seriously interact with DP on a scholarly level and prove from Scripture why theirs is the better system. Unfortunately this is absent from this book.

A Missing Case

This compilation of chapters fails to rightly understand or represent their chief alternative— DP. But perhaps a redeeming factor would be an excellent case made for their own view— HP. Sadly, again, no such case is presented. Going off their misunderstanding of DP, almost every author spills his ink arguing for posttribulationism, thinking that's where the battle between DP and HP rests. Chapter after chapter contains wasted arguments as the contributors miss the exegetical crux of the issue. And to top it all off, their treatment of posttribulationism is weak and adds nothing new to the debate. Though a detailed examination of every chapter's "case" for HP can't be included here, a few examples will suffice.

Chapter two's main argument is that the church will endure the tribulation wrath because of the pattern set in the OT: "The dominant structure of the major prophetic books is tripartite, with condemnation and judgment of God's people followed by judgment against the surrounding nations and culmination with future salvation and blessing for God's people" (27).

So the OT presumes “an order to God’s plans according to which such a tribulation would necessarily include a time of testing for God’s people. In account after account, God preserves his faithful people through suffering and trials, but there is no evidence that they are preserved from or out of such experiences” (28). First off, this chapter is only arguing for a posttrib rapture. Secondly, the argument is extremely weak. Though this “pattern” may be true for Israel in the OT, if the NT explicitly teaches that the church will be preserved from wrath, then that’s all that counts. Where’s the exegesis to refute such NT teachings? Absent. And technically, Israel will be in the tribulation so the pattern can be said to continue anyway. For this author to apply this to the church, he would have to argue for the identity of Israel and the church being the same. Again, this argument is absent. He concludes his chapter with a telling remark: “Were I to look at the OT and hear it as the prophets and their first audiences seem to have understood it, I would be forced to conclude that many elements specific to the restoration of Israel are yet awaiting fulfillment” (35). He actually comes to the correct (and dispensational) conclusion based on a proper reading of the OT, so why doesn’t he conclude this? Any exegetical or theological arguments? None. He has an agenda to fulfill. He has presupposed the posttribulational case and therefore cannot allow Scripture to speak in its plain sense.

Chapter three shows support of a posttribulational rapture by citing ancient Jewish rabbinical thought. Although the author discredits the Jewish rabbis as terribly inconsistent, and though they didn’t know of a rapture, she still uses them in her support. “Consequently, most Jewish interpretations related to the messianic age present a view that parallels more closely that of the Christian posttribulational premillennial view than any of the other Christian views mentioned in this essay” (42). But the question then is, so what? This is another extremely weak case for HP, which again is just a case for posttribulationalism. Didn’t the rabbis get the OT

wrong in the first place? Didn't they miss the point about the Messiah and other prophecies? Is this really a witness they want on their side? And there is no consideration of the concepts of mystery and progressive revelation present in this "case."

Chapter four is the closest this book gets to any exegetical or theological argument, but the subject is still purely posttribulationism in the NT. Blomberg deals with the proof texts of pretribulationism, but in a very cursory and unconvincing manner. He adds nothing new to the debate here (in fact, he wrongly labels Matt 24:40-41 as a pretrib proof text). He then uses the concept of suffering to prove a posttribulationist repute. Blomberg claims "the NT writers uniformly expected suffering and hardship to be the common lot of believers throughout their earthly existence" (77). This is certainly true, but does this necessarily mean they will suffer the great tribulation wrath of God? Even if other texts preclude this? Another author adds, "Regardless of whether one distinguishes between suffering in general and suffering God's wrath, it is fair to argue that dispensationalism as a whole is undergirded by the assumption that God will protect his people from excessive suffering" (123). No, this is not fair to argue. This argument is totally false (another misrepresentation of DP). In fact the opposite is true. DPs know that Scripture is full of promises that Christians will greatly suffer in this life (e.g. Phil 1:29, Acts 14:22). Christians will suffer greatly, but the difference is that they will never suffer the wrath of God. That's the real difference between these views on the tribulation and that's what makes the pretribulationist case. These authors don't seem to understand this though.

A Failed Objective

The goal of this book was to present a case for HP. Rather, the title should be changed to "A Case of Posttribulationism." The sub-title should then read, "An Alternative to 'Left Behind' Eschatology...Though Nothing to Do with Dispensational Premillennialism." Chapter

after chapter, I found myself waiting for the case for HP. It never came. Rather the authors' biases, presuppositions, and frustrations were the only clear part of this book. I wish it weren't the case, but this book entirely fails at its objective and is of little value to the church in understanding eschatology today.