A CRITICAL EVALUATION OF DISPENSATIONALISM: ON THE FULFILMENT OF THE SIGNS OF THE SECOND COMING OF JESUS CHRIST

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I. INTRODUCTION

Dispensationalism is one of the most influential theological systems in the study of Christian eschatology. It is a movement of eschatological interpretation of the Bible prophecy distinguished by its belief that a consistent literal hermeneutic mandates a consistent distinction between Israel and the Church in the understanding of the Bible prophecy. Its understanding of the signs of the Second Coming of Jesus Christ and of the fulfillment of these signs not only presents unique feature of its understanding of prophecy but also expresses its particular characteristics.

This study seeks to evaluate the dispensationalism’s understanding of the fulfillment of the signs of the Second Coming of Jesus Christ. In order to achieve this goal, it is necessary to understand the characteristics of dispensationalism and to outline its understanding of the signs of the Second Coming of Jesus Christ and their fulfillment. Therefore, the purpose of this paper is twofold. First, this study seeks to determine clearly the dispensational view of the fulfillment of the signs of the Second Coming of Jesus Christ. Secondly, it will critically evaluate the understanding of dispensationalism on the fulfillment of the signs of the Second Coming of Jesus Christ.

However, this study has two delimitations. First of all, this study will not deal with all the signs of the Second Coming of Jesus Christ written in the Bible. Among the various signs, two particular signs will be dealt with namely; (1) the salvation of all Israel (Romans 11:25-29) and (2) the Great Tribulation (Matthew 24:9-12), which present unique feature of the dispensational understanding of the Second Coming. Secondly, this study will not provide an exegetical study of the Bible texts which contain the two particular signs of the Second Coming. Rather, it will take a theological approach, providing biblical-theological critiques.

II. DISPENSATIONALISM

1Since the mid-1800s, the system of theology known as dispensationalism has exerted great influence on how many Christians view the doctrines of eschatology. Indeed, recent studies of eschatology are concentrated upon the debates between historical premillennialism (posttribulational premillennialism) and dispensational premillenialism (pretribulational premillennialism). Of course, amillennialism and postmillennialism still exist.
The focus of this study is to evaluate and criticize the understanding of dispensationalism on the fulfillment of the signs of the Second Coming of Jesus Christ. However, for an appropriate evaluation and critique, it is necessary to understand dispensationalism as a concept; the definition of dispensationalism, its historical background, and its peculiar characteristics.

Definition of Dispensationalism

In general, dispensationalism is defined as a system of biblical interpretation that divides history into several dispensations (economies), in which God reveals a particular purpose that has to be fulfilled in that dispensation.

However, in the area of the study of the end-time events, dispensationalism, in brief, is a system of eschatology marked by a distinction between Israel and the Church; belief in the imminent coming of Jesus Christ to take his church out of the world; a literal interpretation of the Bible; and a literal future Millennium ruled by Christ on earth. Due to its concern about the eschatological goal of history, dispensationalism is often defined in this way: “Dispensationalism is a form of premillennialism and is especially known for its doctrine of the pretribulational rapture as separate from the posttribulational second advent of Christ.”

In this sense, some easily recognize dispensationalism as a particular type of

1Dispensationalists differ in identification or categorization of the dispensations, but it is general to distinguish into seven dispensations: (1) the dispensation of innocence or freedom (Adam before the fall), (2) the dispensation of conscience or self-determination (Adam to Noah), (3) the dispensation of civil government (Noah to Abraham), (4) the dispensation of promise or patriarchal (Abraham to Moses), (5) the dispensation of the Mosaic law (Moses to Christ), (6) the dispensation of grace or church (Pentecost to the rapture), and (7) the dispensation of the Millennium or Kingdom dispensation (after the rapture). For more understanding of the characteristics of each dispensation, see Charles C. Ryrie, Dispensationalism Today (Chicago: Moody Press, 1965), 57-64.


3Craig A. Blaising, “Dispensation, dispensationalism,” Evangelical Dictionary of Theology, 2nd ed., ed. Walter A. Elwell (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2001), 343-345. In fact, many have consciously or unconsciously exposed their first to dispensationalism through the area of eschatology.
premillennialism. However, it must be noted that not all premillennialists are dispensationalists but all dispensationalists are premillennialists.

**Brief History of Dispensationalism**

Dispensationalism, as a system of theology, began to take shape under the influence of John Nelson Darby (1800-1882), a Plymouth Brethren minister, in the mid-1800s. He saw a clear distinction between Israel and the church. He also came to believe in an “any moment” rapture of the church that was followed by Daniel’s seventieth week in which Israel would once again take center stage in God’s plan. After the seventy-weeks, Darby believed there would be a millennial kingdom in which God would fulfill His unconditional promises to Israel.

Various Bible Conferences, which began to spring up in various parts of the United States, helped in the spread of dispensationalism. One of these was the Niagara Conference, which was not aimed at promoting dispensationalism, but it eventually ended up promoting dispensational ideas. The American Bible and Prophetic Conferences also promoted the spread of dispensational theology over North America.

In the history of dispensationalism, the importance of the Scofield Reference Bible cannot be overemphasized. C. I. Scofield formed a board of Bible conference teachers in 1909 and produced the Scofield Reference Bible. This reference Bible became the greatest influence in the spread of dispensationalism.

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3For more study, see Clarence B. Bass, *Backgrounds to Dispensationalism: Its Historical Genesis and Ecclesiastical Implications* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1960), 64-99. For the description of dispensationalist, see Ryrie, 65-85.

4Based on his study of Isaiah 32, Darby concluded that Israel, in a future dispensation, would enjoy earthly blessings that were different from the heavenly blessings experienced by the church.


7Ibid, 39-45.
Through dispensational Bible schools, for example, Dallas Theological Seminary, dispensationalism began to be promoted in formal, academic settings. Under Scofield, dispensationalism entered a scholastic period that was later carried on by his successor, Lewis Sperry Chafer. Further promotion of dispensationalism took place with the writing of Chafer’s eight-volume Systematic Theology.

**Characteristics of dispensationalism**

What is the *sine qua non* of dispensationalism? Charles C. Ryrie, in giving a concise answer to this question, says; “Theoretically the sine qua non ought to lie in the recognition of the fact that God has distinguishably different economies in governing the affairs of the world.” He goes further to give three aspects of the *sine qua non* of dispensationalism, namely; (1) To distinguish between Israel and the Church is the most basic theological test of whether or not a man is a dispensationalist or not. (2) The second aspect of the *sine qua non* of dispensationalism is that a literal interpretation of Scripture is required. This is so due to the belief that there is a distinction between Israel and the Church. (3) The third is a view that the glory of God is His underlying purpose in the world. To a dispensationalist, the saving program of God is not only a program but a means of glorifying God Himself. Other significant beliefs include: (1) the authority of Scripture; (2) belief in dispensations; (3) emphasis on Bible prophecy; (4) premillennialism; (5) pretribulationism; and (6) a view of the imminence of the second coming of Jesus.

In summary, dispensationalism is a system of eschatological interpretation of the Bible, which holds to a distinction between Israel and the Church, and is marked by pretribulational premillennialism. Dispensationalism in its earliest form was composed by J. N. Darby in the mid-1800s. Its theological-eschatological scheme spread to North America in the context of a growing reaction against postmillennialism and liberalism through the contributions of the Bible and Prophetic Conferences and especially, the Scofield Reference Bible. The main characteristics of the dispensationalism are (1) a distinction between Israel and the church, (2) literal hermeneutics, (3) an emphasis on the glory of God as the underlying purpose of God in the world, and (4) an eschatological view of pretribulational premillennialism.

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2Ryrie, 43.

3Ibid, 43-47. According to him, dispensationalism is based on the three
III. DISPENSATIONALISTS’ UNDERSTANDING OF THE FULFILLMENT OF THE SIGNS OF THE SECOND COMING

The final purpose of this study is to evaluate and criticize the understanding of dispensationalism on the fulfillment of the signs of the Second Coming of Jesus Christ. It is reasonable and inevitable, therefore, in the present section, to examine and explore the dispensationalists’ understanding (1) of the Bible prophecy, (2) of the Second Coming, and (3) of the fulfillment of the signs of the Second Coming, especially, the great tribulation and the salvation of all Israel.

Dispensationalists’ Understanding of the Bible Prophecy

Certainly, dispensationalists claim to be literal in their method of interpreting the Bible prophecy, which stems from the “literal interpretation”\(^1\) principle of the Bible. This is one of the basic tenets of dispensationalism. Therefore they hold the principle when one interprets prophetic passages even its literal meaning is not clear.\(^2\)

Two examples, which will be considered and criticized in the last part of this study, are: (1) the prophecies of the restoration of Israel in the last days will be literally fulfilled by the salvation of Israel as a nation (Isaiah 59:20; Romans 11:25-29), (2) the 70 weeks prophecy of Daniel 9 refers to a period of 490 literal years and applies only to Israel. Therefore, the 70th week, seven-years, should be identified as the great tribulation period mentioned in Matthew 24:21-22.\(^3\)

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\(^1\) Ryrie asserts: “Dispensationalists claim that their principle of hermeneutics is that of literal interpretation.” Ryrie, 86. The definition of literal hermeneutic or interpretation given by Paul Lee Tan is more obvious. He says: “To ‘interpret’ means to explain the original sense of a speaker or writer. To interpret ‘literally’ means to explain the original sense of the speaker or writer according to the normal, customary, and proper usage of words and language. Therefore, literal interpretation of the Bible simply means to explain the original sense of the Bible according to the normal and customary usage of its language.” Paul Lee Tan, *The Interpretation of Prophecy* (Winona Lake, ID: BMH Books, 1974), 29. For more understanding of dispensational hermeneutics, see Thomas D. Ice, “dispensational hermeneutics,” in *Issue in Dispensationalism*, ed., Wesley R. Willis and John R. Master (Chicago, MI: Moody Press, 1994), 29-49.


\(^3\) Some dispensationalists limit the great tribulation to the latter half of the seven-year period.
Therefore, the primary understanding of dispensationalism on Bible prophecy is that the Bible texts, especially the prophecies, should be read and interpreted in their plain, ordinary, or literal sense, especially when these texts speak of God’s earthly people, Israel, and when they make promises in respect to Israel.

**Dispensationalists’ Understanding of the Second Coming**

Dispensational view of the Second Coming of Jesus Christ is a twofold returning, which will occur as different events each having a purpose of its own and separated by seven-year period. Dispensationalism holds that the first phrase of Christ’s return, His ‘parousi,a’ (coming), would precede the second phase of Christ’s return, His ‘evpifanei,a’ (appearing) or ‘avpoka,luyij’ (revelation). The second phases would introduce the millennium or one thousand-year reign of Christ on earth. The first phrase is called the secret rapture based on 1 Thessalonians 4:17, an event that represents Christ’s coming ‘for’ His people. The second phase, which will occur after the great tribulation, is His coming ‘with’ his people. In other words, dispensationalists argue that a sharp distinction is to be drawn between the ‘parousi,a’ (the secret rapture) and the ‘evpifanei,a’ or ‘avpoka,luyij’ (‘day of the Lord’), that is, the revelation of Jesus Christ or His practical Second Coming after the tribulation.²

Moreover, such twofold understanding of the Second Coming of Jesus Christ, naturally leads to their unique understanding on the matter of the imminence of the Second Coming of Jesus Christ. According to dispensationalists, the first one (parousi,a) or the secret rapture, is imminent,³ but the other (evpifanei,a or

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¹The passages usually used for the concept of rapture of the Church (parousi,a of Jesus) are John 14:1-3; 1 Corinthians 15:50-57; 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18; 5:1-11; 2 Thessalonians 2:1-12; and Matthew 24:3-51. For exegetical explanation of these texts of dispensationalist, see Thomas R. Edgar, “An Exegesis of Rapture Passages,” in *Issue in Dispensationalism*, 203-223.

²In this sense, dispensationalism is pretribulationism. “Pretribulationalism has become a regular feature of dispensational premillennialism.” Rhyie, 160. However, Erickson gives more clear classification between them. “All dispensationalists are pretribulationists for pretribulationism is a part of the full system of dispensationalism—but not all pretribulationists are dispensationalists.” Millard J. Erickson, *Contemporary Options in Eschatology: A Study of the Millennium* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1977), 125.

³“When one investigates the passages of Scripture dealing with the Rapture, there are no signs given that must be fulfilled... Thus we [dispensationalists] maintain that there are no intervening events that militate against the imminent return of the Lord to rapture the church.” Earl D. Radmacher, “The Imminent Return of The Lord,” *Issue in Dispensationalism*, 255-257. In the note of the *New Scofield Reference Bible*, on the Luke 21:27; 2 Thessalonians 2:3; Revelation 19:19, the rapture is viewed as an event that can occur at any time. C. I. Scofield, ed., *The new Scofield reference Bible* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1909), 1114, 1294-5,
avpoka,luyij) or the day of the Lord, that is, the revelation of Jesus Christ or His practical Second Coming, is not.¹

**Dispensationalists’ Understanding of the Fulfillment of the Signs of the Second Coming**

In the Bible, there are various signs of the Second Coming of Jesus Christ, which must to be fulfilled before His Coming.² These prophecies or signs may be categorized as follows³: (1) The Preaching of the Gospel to All Nations (Mark 13:72-3. See also Lewis Sperry Chafer, *Systematic Theology* (Dallas: Dallas Seminary Press, 1948), 4:367-8.

¹“The Second Coming [the revelation of Jesus] will be preceded by signs that are the specific fulfillment of events predicted in the Scripture.” Earl D. Radmacher, 252. According to dispensationalists, a number of events or a fulfillment of the signs must be occur during the two coming of Jesus; between ‘parousi,a’ and ‘evpifanei,a’ or ‘avpoka,luyij.’ First, a seven-year period tribulation will begin, the latter half of which will be a period of the “great tribulation” as a fulfillment of the prophecy of Daniel 9:27 (Matthew 24:21, 22). Second, the Antichrist, who will impose great cruelties on the earth and pretend to be Christ, will arise in the period of “great tribulation” (2 Thessalonians 2:8-10). Third, the conversion of Israel as a nation will be happened (Romans 11:26). Fourth, a great number of the Gentiles will be saved or enter the kingdom (Matthew 8:11; Romans 9:24-26). Fifth, in end of this period of tribulation, the king of the earth, Satan, and his armies, and wicked will join forces against the people of God. However, Christ will return with his saints (evpifanei,a or avpoka,luyij) and destroy all of his enemies at the battle of Armageddon.

²Hoekema groups these various signs of the Second Coming of Jesus Christ into three headings and some subdivisions. (1) Signs evidencing the grace of God: (a) The proclamation of the gospel to all nations, and (b) The salvation of the fullness of Israel; (2) Signs indicating opposition to God: (a) Tribulation, (b) Apostasy, and (c) Antichrist; (3) Signs indicating divine judgment: (a) Wars, (b) Earthquakes, and (c) Famines. A. A. Hoekema, *The Bible and the Future* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1979), 137-163. Samuele Bacchiocchi, similar to Hoekema’s, divides these “advent signs” into four classes. (1) The signs of divine grace: (a) Worldwide Evangelism; (2) The signs of opposition to God: (a) Messianic Pretenders, (b) The Antichrist, (c) The Apostasy, (d) The Evildoer, (e) Increased Wickedness, (f) Age of Appetite, and (g) Age of Sex; (3) The signs of divine judgment: (a) Wars and Rumors of War, (b) Natural Disasters, (c) Man-made Disasters, (d) Famines, and (e) Pestilences; (4) The mistaken signs: (a) The Restoration of the Jews to Palestine, (b) The Rapture, and (c) The Rebuilding of the Tribulation Temple. Samuele Bacchiocchi, *The Adventist Hope for Human Hopelessness: A Theological Study of the Meaning of the Second Advent for Today* (Berrien Springs, MI: Biblical Perspectives, 1986), 125-262.

13:10), (2) The Great Tribulation (Mark 13:19-20), (3) False Prophets Working Signs and Wonders (Mark 13:22), (4) Signs in Heaven (Mark 13:24-25), (5) The Coming of the Man of Sin and the Rebellion (2 Thessalonians 2:1-10), (6) The Salvation of all Israel (Romans 11:25-26). Among them, two particular signs: the salvation of all Israel (Romans 11:25-26) and the Great Tribulation (Matthew 24:9-12; Mark 13:19-20), which present unique features of the dispensationalism, will be focused.

In arguing for the two-phase return of Jesus, dispensationalists insist that the various signs of Christ second coming must be fulfilled literally between the first phase of Jesus’ return (the rapture of the Church) and the second phase of Jesus’ return (the appearance of Jesus), that is, during the seven-year period of tribulation. According to dispensationalists, in other words, the prophecies or signs of the great tribulation and the salvation of all Israel must be fulfilled after the rapture of the Church (the first phase of Jesus’ return) and just before the final appearance of Jesus (the second phase of Jesus’ return).¹

The dispensationalists’ understanding of the fulfillment of the Second Coming of Jesus Christ is based on the literal hermeneutical principle of Bible interpretation, which assumes an absolute literal fulfillment of the prophecies.² According to dispensationalists, thus, the sign of the Great Tribulation (Matthew 24:9-12) must be fulfilled to Israel as a nation since it was told to Israel before the beginning of the Church. C. I. Scofield, one of the representatives of dispensationalism, asserts:

[In Prophetic Scripture]... We reach the ground of absolute literalness. Figures are often found in the prophecies, but the figure invariably has a literal fulfillment. Not one instance exists of a ‘spiritual’ or figurative fulfillment of prophecy... Jerusalem is always Jerusalem, Israel is always Israel, Zion is always Zion... Prophecies may never be spiritualized, but are always literal.³

Such dispensationalist understanding of the fulfillment of the signs naturally leads to the concept that distinguishes Israel from the Church.⁴ According

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³Cyrus I. Scofield, The Scofield Bible Correspondence Course (Chicago, MI: Moody Bible Institute, 1934), 45-46, quoted in Bass, 150.

⁴Ryrie, 154. He asserts: “Use of the words Israel and Church shows clearly

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to the explanation of dispensationalism, the system of order instituted in the Church was inserted in between the order specified by the Mosaic Law and the government of the Millennium or Kingdom. At the time of the rapture, many Old Testament prophecies about Israel (Zechariah 12:10; Isaiah 59:20; etc.) and New Testament prophecies (Romans 11:25-29) about the restoration and salvation of Israel, will be fulfilled before the revelation of Jesus which marks the beginning point of the Millennium.

In summary, first, dispensationalist understanding of the prophecies or signs of the Second Coming is based upon the literal hermeneutical principle that the Old Testament Prophecies must be interpreted literally. Second, dispensationalism insists that the Second Coming of Jesus Christ will be twofold; the rapture of the church and the appearing of Jesus, which will occur as different events. Third, dispensationalists believe that the signs of the Second Coming of Jesus Christ will be fulfilled in an absolute literal way. They then hope to witness the literal-national fulfillment of the prophecies predicted to Israel: the Great tribulation and the restoration of Israel.

IV. A CRITICAL EVALUATION OF THE UNDERSTANDING OF DISPENSATIONALISM ON THE FULFILMENT OF THE SIGNS OF THE SECOND COMING

The main purpose of this study is to evaluate and criticize the understanding of dispensationalism on the fulfillment of the signs of the Second Coming of Jesus Christ. In the previous two sections, the brief understanding of dispensationalism and its views of the fulfillment of the signs of the Second Coming of Jesus Christ were reviewed. This section, therefore, as a final step, will attempt to provide critical evaluations to the dispensationalism’s understanding of the fulfillment of the signs of the Second Coming of Jesus Christ.

Evaluation on the Interpretation of the Bible prophecy

The understanding of dispensationalism on the fulfillment of the signs of the Second Coming of Jesus Christ is due to its general hermeneutical principles of interpreting Scripture. Consequently, it is reasonable to evaluate the general hermeneutical principles of dispensationalism as a starting point in criticizing dispensational understanding of the fulfillment of the signs of the Second Coming of Jesus Christ.

1. Literal Interpretation

The literal interpretation of the Bible, as reviewed before, is the first general hermeneutical principle of dispensationalism. On the basis of the absolutely that in the New Testament national Israel continues with her own promises and the Church is never equated with a so called ‘new Israel’.” Ibid, 140.
literal interpretation, also known as “consistent literalism,” dispensationalists assert that the prophecies of the restoration of Israel must be fulfilled in an absolutely literal sense to literal Israel as a nation at the final moment of the tribulation.

However, does the literal interpretation principle of the Bible prophecy excludes a spiritual meaning or figurative and symbolical usage of the language suitable for proper understanding of the fulfillment of that prophecy? Is the principle of “consistent literalism” the legitimate method of interpreting Bible prophecies?

Samuele Bacchiocchi, in his critical study of “consistent literalism” of dispensationalism, concludes that it is illegitimate:

In summary, the principle of “consistent literalism” advocated by dispensationalists fails adequately to interpret Biblical prophecy, because it ignores the progressive nature of God’s revelation; it disregards the messianic and expanding fulfillment of Old Testament prophecies; and it contradicts itself through its inconsistent interpretation of Biblical prophecies. ¹

Hans K. LaRondelle also reached the same conclusion with a little different reasoning: “Dispensational literalism does not allow that Jesus Christ provided a new perspective for interpreting the Old Testament.” ² George E. Ladd, consequently, suggests that: “Old Testament prophecies must be interpreted in the light of the New Testament to find their deeper meaning.” ³

Therefore, the interpretation of Bible prophecies must be done in the light of the context. All Bible prophecies cannot be interpreted in an absolutely literal sense. Thus, the major problem of dispensationalism is its adoption of an absolutely literal method of interpreting the Bible prophecy. ⁴

2. Distinction between Israel and the Church

A second major tenet of the general hermeneutical principle of dispensationalism is a sharp and definite distinction between Israel and the Church. Consequently, since there are many prophecies about Israel which have not yet been

¹Bacchiocchi, 220-225.


⁴Daniel Fuller, Gospel and Law: Contrast or Continuum? The Hermeneutics of Dispensationalism and Covenant Theology (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980), 71.
fulfilled, dispensationalists assert that these prophecies must be fulfilled literally in the future through literal Israel. The sign of the salvation of all Israel (Romans 11:25-29) is a typical example.

However, is this concept of a radical distinction between Israel and the Church a Biblical teaching? Does the New Testament see the Church as a people of God different and separated from the people of Israel?

In answering this question, Anthony A. Hoekema posits that; “As a matter of fact, the New Testament itself often interprets expression relating to Israel in such a way as to apply them to the New Testament church, which includes both Jews and Gentiles.” LaRondelle also reached the same conclusion proposing more detail reasons: (1) Jesus, by officially ordaining the twelve disciples as his apostles (Mark 3:14), founded His Church as a new organism, the messianic remnant of Israel, and a replacement of the Christ-rejecting nation, that is, literal Israel. (2) The New Testament does not regard the Church as a temporary interruption of God’s plan, an assertion of dispensationalists, nor does it suggest a postponement of the fulfillment of the prophecies about Israel as which will be fulfilled after the rapture of the Church. In other words, the Church is the recipient of the Old Testament prophecies to Israel. Moreover, the “Israel of God,” according to Bacchiocchi’s observation, is composed of “believing Jews and Gentiles,” “who constitute the New Testament church.”

Evaluation on the Understanding of the Second Coming

The understanding of dispensationalism on the fulfillment of the signs of the Second Coming is closely related to its understanding of the Coming itself. Moreover, the understanding of the Second Coming is the distinctive character of

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1Bacchiocchi, 225.
2Hoekemas, 197. Three reasons for his conclusion are (1) the term “Israel” is used as inclusive of Gentiles in the New Testament, (2) Peter applies in plainest words what the Old Testament said about Israel to the Church, (3) the term “seed of Abraham,” which was used in the Old Testament to designate Israel, Abraham’s physical descendants, has been applied to indicate a group of believers includes Gentiles. See Ibid, 196-201.
3LaRondelle, 98-108.
4Bacchiocchi, 228. He views the Church, not a temporary intercalation, but as the continuation of the true Israel of God, and gives many Biblical references for his view. Ibid, 225-230. He concludes: “The Church and Israel thus share together not only in the same present salvation but also in the same ultimate glorification and restoration.” Ibid, 230.
5Hoekema, 197.
dispensational millennialism. Consequently, it is reasonable to evaluate dispensational understanding of the Second Coming of Jesus Christ itself before criticizing dispensational understanding of the fulfillment of the signs of His Coming.

1. The Two-phase Second Coming

Dispensationalism, as reviewed before, maintains a two-phase view of Jesus’ return: the first phase is the rapture of the Church and the other is the appearance of Jesus. According to dispensationalism, all signs of the Second Coming of Jesus Christ will be fulfilled during seven-years, between these two-phase of Jesus’s return.

However, two key questions must be addressed in respect to the concept of the two-phase of Jesus return. First, does the Bible teach two-phase of Christ’s return? Second, does the Bible teach that the first of these phases is the rapture of the Church?

It is evidently clear that there is no single biblical reference in favor of the position that the Second Coming of Jesus Christ is divided into two-phases.\(^1\) Moreover, dispensationalism holds this view based on the assumption that the great tribulation is supposed to be only for literal Israel, and not for the Church. Due to the fact, dispensationalism believes that the church will be taken from the earth at the time of rapture before the beginning of the tribulation.\(^2\) Although they insist on this view, the view cannot be sustained by the appeal to Scripture.\(^3\) Consequently, the conclusion of Hoekema is correct: “We conclude therefore that there is no Scriptural basis for the two-phase Second Coming taught by pretribulationists.”\(^4\)

2. The Rapture

Dispensationalists posit that the restoration of literal Israel will be established by Christ at His return (the appearance of Jesus). But before the establishment of the earthly kingdom of Israel as a nation, the rapture of the church or the secret coming, must be taken place first. Consequently, the rapture, according to them, will take place just before or at the time of beginning of the tribulation.\(^5\)

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\(^1\)LaRondelle, 98-108. Keith A. Mathison also asserts: “Do dispensationalists provide scriptural support for this admittedly new doctrine? As we shall see, the answer is no.” Keith A. Mathison, *Dispensationalism: Rightly Dividing the People of God?* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing, 1995), 116.

\(^2\)Ryrie, 159.


\(^4\)Hoekema, 170.

However, two key questions must be addressed in respect to the rapture of the Church. First, how can Christ come to establish a millennial kingdom of Israel on this earth, if all the believers (Church) are taken from this earth at the time of the rapture? Second, does not the Bible teach that the Second Coming of Jesus Christ is a personal, visible, and a glorious coming in contrast to a secret coming?!

With careful study of the Biblical texts relevant to the Second Coming of Jesus Christ, Bacchiocchi gives four reasons for rejecting the concept of the secret rapture: (1) the fact that the vocabulary of the second coming offers no support for the rapture of the Church, (2) the fact that there is no trace in the New Testament of a secret, invisible rapture of the Church, (3) the fact that the view of pretribulational rapture is not supported by the tribulation passages, and (4) the fact that none of the writings of Paul and John indicate a pretribulational secret coming of Jesus to the rapture of the Church is mentioned nor suggested. Consequently, the conclusion of Hoekema, though he is an amillennialist, is correct: “The Second Coming of Christ must be thought of as a single event, which occurs after the Great Tribulation.”

Evaluation on the Fulfillment of the Signs of the Second Coming

What is the dispensationalists’ concept of the fulfillment of the signs of the Second Coming of Jesus Christ? How do they interpret and apply the signs of the Second Coming of Jesus Christ? Among various signs of the Second Coming of Jesus Christ, two particular signs: the Great Tribulation (Matthew 24:9-12) and the salvation of all Israel (Romans 11:25-29), present unique features of dispensational understanding. This study will consider and evaluate these propositions.

1. The Great Tribulation

Dispensationalists understand that Matthew 24 does not talk about the destruction of the Jewish Temple in A.D. 70, but rather, it speaks solely of signs that precede the Second Coming of Jesus Christ. This view implies that the Olivet Discourse is directed to Jewish disciples who are representatives of the converted Israel of the last days. Consequently, on the basis of their distinction between Israel and the Church, the great tribulation is what relates only to the Jew, Israel as a nation, and not to the Church.

However, two questions must be addressed in respect to the dispensational understanding of the fulfillment of the signs of the great tribulation. First, whom do the twelve disciples represent, Israel or the Church? Should the predictions of Matthew 24 be interpreted as having to do only with Israel? Second, does Matthew 24 teach the pretribulational rapture of the Church?

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1Hoekema, 171-172. See also Erickson, 1194-1197.

2Bacchiocchi, 246-251.

3Hoekema, 170.
To answer the first question properly, one must consider the parallel passages of Matthew 24; that is, Mark 13:3-37 and Luke 21:5-36. Both Mark and Luke apply the Olivet Discourse of Jesus to the gentile Churches and not only for the Jews or Israel as a nation. LaRondelle, on the basis of this fact, asserts; “The context of Matthew 24, however, clearly indicates that Christ addressed His prophetic discourse to His apostles, who stand unquestionably as representatives of His Church, not of national Israel.”¹ Anthony A. Hoekema, giving the example of “prophetic foreshortening”² used by Jesus in Matthew 24, also makes the same assertion;

Though the tribulation, persecution, suffering, and trials here predicted are described in terms which concern Palestine and the Jews, they must not be interpreted as having to do only with the Jews. Jesus was describing future events in terms which would be understandable to his hearers, in terms which had local ethnic and geographic color. We are not warranted, however, in applying these predictions only to the Jews, or in restricting their occurrence only to Palestine.³

The second question is about the sequence of the rapture of the Church and the tribulation. Does Matthew 24 teach the pretribulational rapture of the Church or posttribulational parousia (coming) of Jesus? It is important to notice that in Matthew 24, Jesus describes the rapture in a way that it will not only follow the period of tribulation but also mark the end of the age. Matthew 24:29 clearly says; “Immediately after the suffering of those days [the period of tribulation] the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light; the stars will fall from heaven, and the powers of heaven will be shaken” (NIV).⁴ Moreover, Matthew 24:22 says, “...

¹LaRondelle, 195.

²The prophetic foreshortening is a technical term, which was characteristic of the Old Testament prophets, used by Jesus in here is a method of teaching, in which events far removed in time and events in the near future. According Hoekema’s explanation, consequently, the prophets saw only one Christ second coming, with no distinction made between two-phases of that coming.

³Hoekema, 149.

⁴Of course, dispensationalists insist that those passages, Matthew 24:29-31, tells the second-phase of the Christ’s return, not the rapture of the Church. However, the description of Matthew 24:31, “And he [the Son of Man] will send out his angels with a loud trumpet call, and they will gather his elect from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other,” is similar to the language used in 1 Thessalonians 4:16-17, according to dispensationalists, to describe the events that will occur at the time of the rapture of the Church, the first-phase of the Christ’s return. Consequently, it is difficult to see these passages should be taken as descriptions of different events, as in dispensationalists insist. Therefore, if Matthew 24:31 refers to the rapture, as 1 Thessalonians 4:16-17 refers, the event of Matthew 24:29, the period of tribulation,
for the sake of the elect those days [the tribulation days] will be shortened.”
Furthermore, the term “the elect” (verses 22, 24, 31) indicates that believers will experience it. Therefore, it is reasonable to conclude that the tribulation will precede the parousia of Jesus.¹ LaRondelle asserts; “Christ’s prophetic perspective of future events in Matthew 24 does not contain a pretribulational rapture of the Church.”²

In conclusion, as we consider the passage (Matthew 24), dispensational interpretation is arbitrary and artificial. Moreover, it neglects the consideration of the context and the theological meaning of the passage. Furthermore, it violates the standard Protestant methods of interpretation. Then, it can be said that it stands upon an assumption that Scripture distinguishes between Israel and the Church. Consequently, Hoekema’s conclusion is valuable:

There is no indication in Jesus’ words that the great tribulation which he predicts will be restricted to the Jew, and that Gentile Christians, or the church in distinction from the Jews, will not have to go through it.³

2. The Salvation of All Israel

Dispensationalists, as reviewed before, on the basis of the distinction between Israel and the Church, argue that the sign of the salvation of all Israel (Romans 11:25-26) will be literally fulfilled to the future national Israel just before or at the beginning of the Millennium. After the salvation of all Israel, Jesus will rule the converted Israel, now gathering in its ancient homeland, for the period of the Millennium.⁴

However, two questions must be addressed in respect to the dispensational understanding of the fulfillment of the sign of the salvation of all Israel. First, does the term “all Israel” used here mean only national Israel? In other words, does Israel continue to exist as a part from the Church or as part of the Church? Second, does this passage imply theocracy of Israel, which will be restored and continue during the millennium, in Palestine?

In order to understand the clause “so all Israel will be saved,” it must be observed carefully in the context of Romans and Paul’s intention of the usage. Although Paul distinguishes between Christ-believing Jews and Christ-believing

would place first. In other words, the rapture (verse 31) would take place after the tribulation (verse 29). See Ladd, 72-73. He concludes; “The Rapture of the Church before the Tribulation is an assumption; it is not taught in the Olive discourse.” Ibid, 73.¹

²LaRondelle, 195.

³Hoekema, 151.

⁴Pentecost, 504-507

¹Berkohf, 700.
Gentiles within the church at Rome (Romans 11:5, 13), the distinction was to prohibit them from boasting to each other concerning their superiority or prerogative within the church (Romans 11:18, 25; 12:3), but not indicate a different eschatological destiny. Consequently, Paul’s distinction of ethnic origins within the church at Rome does not imply the concept of a radical distinction between God’s plan for Israel and that of the Church. Moreover, with several reasons against dispensational understanding of the literal salvation of all Israel, Bacchiocchi emphasizes the unity existing between Israel and the Church. This unified body is, in fact, the true Israel as implied by some significant statements of Christ, Peter, and Paul.

In relation to the second question, can the phrase, “so all Israel will be saved,” be construed as teaching the restoration of Israel’s theocracy in Palestine? According to F. F. Bruce’s observation, Paul, in this passage, is saying “nothing about the restoration of an earthly Davidic kingdom, nothing about national reinstatement in the land of Israel. What he envisaged for his people was something infinitely better.” Moreover, the dispensational insistence on the restoration of national Israel in Palestine generates other questions. Where and how will the Church exist after the restoration of Israel’s theocracy in Palestine? Should the Church hope for a destiny in heaven through the rapture and Israel hope for a place on this earth (especially in Palestine) through the restoration? In relation to salvation, however, the Bible does not distinguish between the Church and Israel, whoever believes, will meet together in one new city, the New Jerusalem, which has gates named after the twelve tribes of Israel and foundations bearing the names of the apostle of Christ’s Church (Revelation 21:12-14).

In summary, first, dispensationalism has two distinctive principles of interpretation of the Scripture: the literal interpretation of the Scripture and the distinction between Israel and the Church. Both principles are not the legitimate way of interpreting Bible prophecies or the signs of the Second Coming of Jesus Christ. Actually, dispensationalists read the signs of the second coming of Jesus through the lens of their assumption, which is a radical separation between Israel and the Church.

Second, the dispensationalists’ teaching of the two-phase of Jesus return and the rapture of the church are not founded upon the teaching of any Scripture passage. The Bible teaches neither that the Church will be exempted from the tribulation, nor that the rapture of the Church will occur just as described by

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1LaRondelle, 125.

2Ibid, 225-229.


4LaRondelle, 145.
dispensationalism. Rather the Bible asserts that the second coming of Jesus is a personal, visible, and glorious coming in contrast to a secret coming.

Third, dispensationalists' understandings on two particular signs of the Second Coming of Jesus Christ: the sign of the Great Tribulation and the restoration of Israel, is arbitrary and artificial. Moreover, their understanding neglects the consideration of the context and the theological meaning of the passages. Furthermore, in relation to tribulation and salvation, the Bible does not distinguish between the Church and Israel. The Bible clearly teaches that the Church, the believers, not national Israel, will be saved and that the Church will be protected, not exempted, in the time of tribulation.

V. SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

As mentioned in the introduction, this study is a critical assessment of the understanding of dispensationalism of the fulfillment of the signs of the Second Coming of Jesus Christ. Hence, the study clearly outlined the dispensational understanding of the fulfillment of the signs of Second Coming of Jesus Christ and sought to evaluate and criticize it.

In the first section, as a background, dispensationalist teachings were examined. Dispensationalism is a system of eschatological interpretation of the Bible, which holds to a distinction between Israel and the Church. It was formed by J. N. Darby in the mid-1800s. Its theological-eschatological scheme spread to North America through the contributions of the Bible and Prophetic Conferences and especially, the Scofield Reference Bible. The main characteristics of dispensationalism are (1) a distinction between Israel and the church, (2) literal hermeneutics, (3) an emphasis on the glory of God, and (4) an eschatological view of pretribulational premillennialism.

In the second section, the study examined dispensationalist understanding of the fulfillment of the signs of the Second Coming of Jesus Christ. First, dispensationalist understanding of the Bible prophecies or signs of the Second Coming of Jesus Christ is the hermeneutic of literalism, which means that the Bible prophecies must be interpreted literally. Second, dispensationalists insists that the Second Coming of Jesus Christ is twofold; the rapture of the church and the appearing of Jesus, which will occur as different events. Third, dispensationalists believe that the signs of the Second Coming of Jesus Christ will be fulfilled in an absolute literal way. Consequently, they anticipate the literal-national fulfillment of the prophecies predicted to Israel—the Great Tribulation and the restoration of Israel.

The third section aimed at an evaluation on the dispensationalists’ understanding of the fulfillment of the signs of the Second Coming of Jesus Christ. First, the two distinctive principles dispensationalists use in the interpretation of Bible prophecy (the literalism and the distinction between Israel and the Church) are not a legitimate way of interpreting its prophecies. Actually, dispensationalists’
insistence of the literalism ignores the considering of the context and the conditions in which the author wrote. Moreover, it may be said that their literal interpretation of the Scripture is the product of an insistence upon a radical separation between Israel (God’s earthly people) and the Church (God’s spiritual people).

Second, dispensationalists’ understanding of the Second Coming of Jesus Christ; the two-phase of Jesus return and the rapture of the church, is not founded upon the teaching of any Scripture passage. The Bible teaches neither that the Church will be exempted from the Great Tribulation nor that the rapture of the Church will be occurred just as described by dispensationalism.

Third, dispensationalists’ understanding of the fulfillment of the signs of the Second Coming of Jesus Christ, (especially, of two particular signs: the sign of the Great Tribulation and the restoration of Israel), is arbitrary and artificial. Their understanding neglects the consideration of the context and the theological meaning of the passages. Furthermore, in relation to the great tribulation and the salvation of Israel, the Bible does not distinguish between the Church and Israel. Rather the Bible clearly teaches that the Church, the believers, not national Israel, will be saved and that the Church will be protected, not exempted, in the time of tribulation.

In conclusion, no mention is made regarding the Great Tribulation (Matthew 24:9-12) after the rapture of the Church, nor is anything said about the restoration or salvation of the nation of Israel (Romans 11:25-29) as a racial-ethnic Israel kingdom in the land of Palestine. Thus, the understanding of dispensationalist of the fulfillment of the Second Coming of Jesus Christ does not harmonize with sound biblical understanding of Bible prophecy.
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