

Ouroboros and/or Butterfly: A Book Review of *The Rise and Fall of Dispensationalism* by David Hummel

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Abstract: *This article is a review of David Hummel's The Rise and Fall of Dispensationalism, a book that questions whether the academic debate around dispensationalism is truly dead. By exploring through the lens of metaphorical theology, we look at how commercialization caused academic dispensationalism to self-cannibalize. Applying analysis to both the ouroboros and butterfly metaphors we can examine whether dispensationalism is dead or if there is a potential for a newer, stronger version of academic debate on the topic to resurface once again. Equally as plausible, is the notion that dispensationalism has changed its meaning through the metamorphosis process of changing from academic dispensationalism to pop-dispensationalism. By looking at the meaning change that occurs at the point of transaction, we see that the biography of dispensationalism shows a significant shift in meaning as it becomes a commercial hit.*

Keywords: Dispensationalism, Ouroboros, Metaphorical Theology, New Christian Right, Cannibal Capitalism

Introduction

The *Rise and Fall of Dispensationalism* is a brilliant historical treatise on dispensationalism. As Hummel traced the history of dispensational theology, there was a clear fork in the road, where dispensational rhetoric split into two factions: academic/scholastic dispensationalism and pop-dispensationalism. Hummel asserts that one of the many reasons academic/scholastic dispensationalism began to suffer was due to the arrival of pop-dispensationalism. In the preface of “Cannibal Capitalism,” Fraser writes, “The verb ‘to cannibalize’ means to deprive one facility or enterprise of an essential element of its functioning for the purpose of creating or sustaining

another one.”¹ With the introduction of dispensationalism to pop culture, through the commercialization of books and movies on topics such as the End-Times, did pop-dispensationalism deprive academic dispensationalism of the oxygen that it needed to survive in academia by creating a vacuum where all oxygen was funneled into the pop-dispensational controversies?

Alternatively, one could approach this subject through the lens of, “The Cultural Biography of Things,” in which Kopytoff suggests that the meaning of a thing changes through the transaction process.² Simply put, the question before us today is, “Did pop-dispensationalism kill academic/scholastic dispensationalism as a viable topic in academia or did the meaning change as dispensationalism moved from an academic topic to one which was commercially available to the masses?” By analyzing the mythology of the ouroboros, we see an ancient symbol depicting a serpent biting its own tail.³ Symbologists believe that the ouroboros represents death and rebirth, much like the phoenix. It also could represent self-cannibalism. Is it possible to discern whether the introduction of pop-dispensationalism caused a symbolic metamorphosis or the actual death of dispensationalism? More pointedly, is pop-dispensationalism the rebirth of dispensationalism in a new form or did the meaning to society at large shift to such a level that pop-dispensationalism is altogether different from its academic/scholastic predecessor? I propose that there has not been a death to the academic/scholastic questions surrounding dispensationalism, and that the introduction of pop-dispensationalism simply caused a shift in the meaning, via the commercialization process which cheapened the importance of these topics.

The use of the terms ouroboros and butterfly in the title of this book review is meant to anchor us within the domain of metaphorical theology. In Sallie McFague’s seminal work, she explains why metaphors are necessary by saying,

The primary context, then, for any discussion of religious language is worship. Unless one has a sense of the mystery surrounding existence, of the profound inadequacy of all our thoughts and words, one will most likely identify God with our words: God becomes father, mother, lover, friend. Unless one has a sense of the nearness of God, the overwhelming sense of the way God pervades and permeates our very being, one will not find religious images significant: the power of the images for God of father,

¹ Fraser, *Cannibal capitalism: How our system is devouring democracy, care, and the planet - and what we can do about it*.

² Soliman, “A Tail in the Mouth,” 16–41.

³ Soliman, “A Tail in the Mouth,” 16–41.

mother, lover, friend will not be appreciated. Apart from religious context, religious language will inevitably go awry either in the direction of idolatry or irreverence or both.⁴

Ironically, it is the very same metaphor language that brings God closer and makes the Divine more real, that also by its very nature cheapens the experience. When we use language to describe God, we remove the Divine from the place of ineffability and transport the Divine into one that is finite and concrete. Simultaneously, using metaphors to describe God brings both clarity and obscures the true Divine nature. Likewise, defining dispensationalism through the lens of metaphor will be tricky and some may debate the semantics, which is why it is critical to explain the distinction from the very beginning. As was stated earlier, the ouroboros represents a cyclical nature of death and rebirth, where the thing that dies comes back as a stronger version of itself. When that metaphor is juxtaposed against the metaphor of a butterfly, who is born a caterpillar and then goes through a metamorphosis to reemerge as a butterfly, which is an altogether different creature, we see that there are distinctions that matter in how we describe dispensationalism as it has transformed throughout history. Is pop-dispensationalism a stronger and better version of academic dispensationalism or is it an altogether different creature? Likewise, we can ask, can academic dispensationalism make a comeback with a stronger version of itself? The answers to these questions will tell us whether dispensationalism has truly fallen.

Ouroboros or Butterfly?

In the title of this book, Hummel makes a statement that dispensationalism has fallen. As we read on, we come to understand that what he meant by that statement is that the academic and scholastic vigor that once surrounded the conversation of dispensationalism has waned. We come to see that as this academic vigor began to fall away, there was a simultaneous birth of pop-dispensationalism. The question before us is whether pop-dispensationalism created a vacuum for all the symbolic oxygen, thereby depriving academic dispensationalism of the primary element that it needed to thrive. By looking at the launch of pop-dispensationalism we can see what happened to academic dispensationalism as a result. Hummel writes,

In 1970, after a few years working as a campus ministry worker in California, [Hal] Lindsey wrote a popularized version of the dispensational

⁴ McFague, *Metaphorical Theology: Models of God in Religious Language*, 2.

eschatology he learned at Dallas [Theological Seminary] titled “The Late Great Planet Earth (1970). The unabashedly unscholastic book went on to sell ten million copies in the decade, doing more to familiarize Americans with the “rapture” and the “tribulation” than any scholastic tome. It also spurred a process that would unravel the scholastic project and, indeed, lead to the demise of the system of dispensationalism itself.⁵

From the seventies through to the early aughts of the new millennium, a multitude of authors would follow Lindsey’s suit, to take advantage of the commercialization of a conversation that was once confined to the hallowed halls of seminaries. As pop culture began to embrace the religious language of the rapture and tribulation, incorporating that language into movies, television shows, and songs which were decidedly secular, it became clear that the topic of dispensationalism had not only been oversimplified but also that the information was so common that someone who had zero religious training could engage with the conversation and know exactly what was being referenced.

By downplaying the conversation surrounding dispensationalism, there was a simultaneous effect of trivializing the conversation which made it accessible to millions but also made it no longer worthy of being debated by scholars. Thus, pop-dispensationalism brought an end to the scholastic debate. And while that may be true, hidden within the ouroboros is the invitation to be reborn as a stronger version of oneself. Hummel does a great job of calling out the many factions within Christianity who see the story of dispensationalism through different lenses. With the writing of Hummel’s book, it is entirely possible that this book could be the match igniting another round of debate. Hummel writes,

The implications of Lindsey’s analysis mirrored a wider pop-dispensational synthesis with a Christian nationalism that saw the United States as a decisive actor in the prophetic timeline. The centrality of the United States to God’s purposes was a basic Christian nationalist conceit that was centuries old, but in the 1970’s it was newly fused with dispensational eschatology that had up to this point been allergic to making prophecy fulfilment conditional on Republican partisan politics.⁶

Hummel blatantly calls out the intertwining of dispensationalism with the New Christian Right and the attached bigotry inherent within that political agenda, and that seems very much to be a clarion call for scholastic debaters to wrestle

⁵ Hummel, *The Rise and Fall of Dispensationalism*, 234

⁶ Hummel, *The Rise and Fall of Dispensationalism*.

and clarify the truth behind their thoughts once again. The deeply disturbing similarities between the spirit/motivation behind Manifest Destiny and behind the Seven Mountain Mandate/Dominionist agenda begs for those with the talent to wade in the waters to reengage with the nuances of scholastic debate once more.

Auto-Ethnographic Analysis of the Pop-Dispensational Movement

The question before us today is not whether dispensationalism is either an ouroboros or a butterfly, but rather whether dispensationalism is an ouroboros and/or a butterfly. As of right now, the academic debate for dispensationalism seems dead while pop-dispensationalism is still being revealed in popular discourse. We know for sure that pop-dispensationalism is a whole different creature, thus fulfilling the butterfly metaphor. The question and answer that only theologians can provide is whether dispensationalism will reemerge once again as a healthy topic of debate in seminary halls. Hummel never once minimizes the nature of the topic of dispensationalism as a worthy topic, he only points to how humans have misapplied their understandings of that topic within society.

As someone who grew up while pop-dispensationalism was also finding its wings, I have personally experienced how the conversations of rapture, tribulation, the tension between Israel's chosen-ness and God's love for the whole world, and other idiosyncrasies found within dispensationalism have shaped the culture of the Western Church and America as a whole. I care deeply about the church and its future. The wave of young people going through the process of deconstruction and leaving the faith is deeply disturbing, even as I go through my own deconstruction process.

Equally alarming is the growing divide in America which can be summed up as the "Sean Feucht style Christianity vs. the Shane Claiborne style of Christianity."⁷ Sean Feucht transformed his previous profession as a worship leader and global activist into a now political activist for the Christian Right, after a brief failed political career. Shane Claiborne has been heralding a progressive liberation-based Christianity for more than twenty years based in Philadelphia. Having spent time in both their camps, this divide hits me straight in the solar plexus. This debate combined with the global effect that the internet has had on Christianity, where one Christian can be fed by competing world

⁷ Feucht, Sean (@Sean Feucht). "Shane Claiborne responds to Sean Feucht's Instagram post describing his views of Christianity in the 21st Century in America." Instagram, June 7, 2023. <https://www.instagram.com/p/CtLfomBsLnx/>.

views by listening to the sermons of all the most popular teachers and preachers today, places many Christians in a deeply troubling dilemma. Christians today have access to the books and sermons from multiple facets of Christianity including John Piper, N.T. Wright, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Brian McClaren, Richard Foster, Oswald Chambers, Bill Johnson, Mike Bickel, Tim Keller, Dallas Willard, Miroslav Volf, Henri Nouwen, and more. Your average lay Christian is not trained to rightly divide systemic theology. In no way am I saying that lay Christians aren't intelligent, however, I am saying that the trickle-down effect of having people who guide your intellectual understanding of theology who come from such various backgrounds can lead to immense confusion. It is for this reason that I believe the need for scholastic and academic debate is needed even more.

Conclusion

David Hummel's, *The Rise and Fall of Dispensationalism* is as close to what Clifford Geertz describes as a "thick description" of the cultural transmission of both academic/scholastic dispensationalism and of pop-dispensationalism.⁸ While at times, the history feels like marching through molasses, the conclusion lends me to encourage every professor in any church history class to use this as a textbook from now on in your classes. The information that Hummel presents is so well done and so needed to fully grasp the relevance of this conversation. While Hummel seems convinced that academic dispensationalism has met its final demise, I for one am hopeful that we will see a resurrection of a stronger version of its previous self, because as the dispensational anthem by the CCM band 4Him proclaims, "For tomorrow and today, we must be a light for future generations."⁹

⁸ Geertz, *Thick description: Toward an interpretive theory of culture*, 312.

⁹ Quoted by Hummel, *The Rise and Fall of Dispensationalism*, 291.

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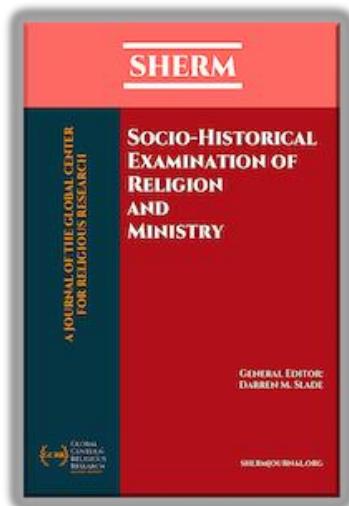
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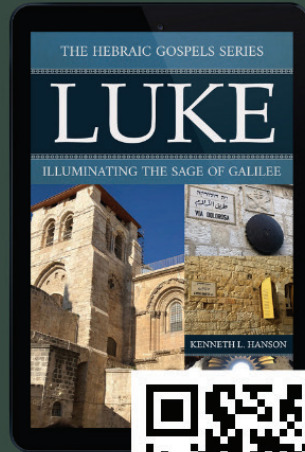
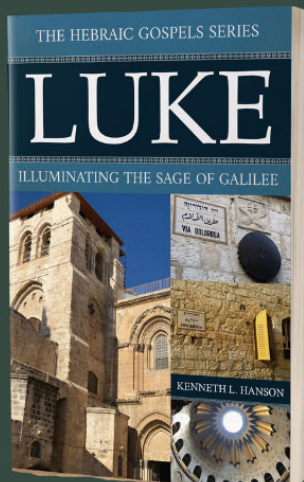
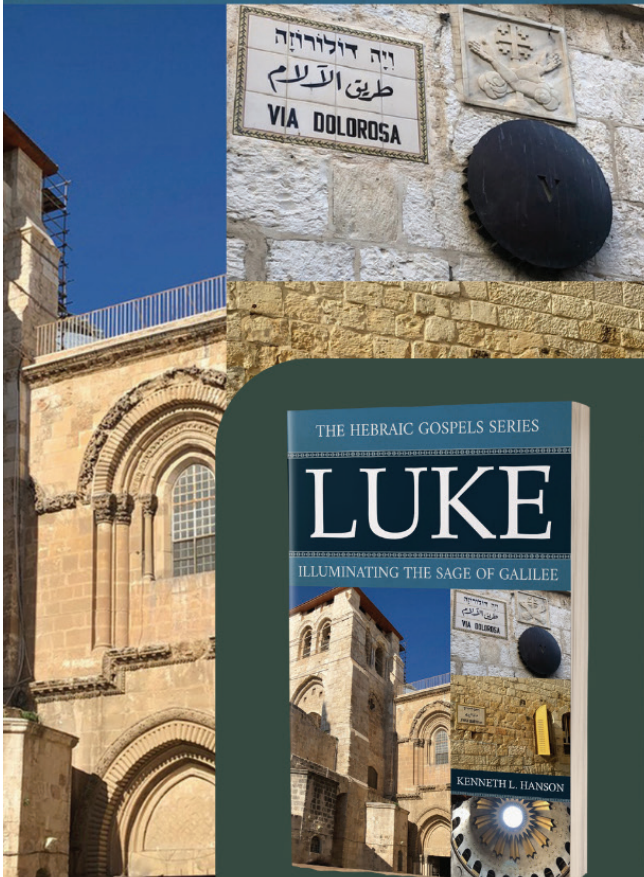
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