

# ESCHATOLOGY: DOCTRINE OF LAST THINGS

## PART 6

### HERMENEUTICS, PART 6

I was asked to provide some information on the background and life of Origen so we will examine his life and theology. It is not an exaggeration to say that his hermeneutics and his Eschatology have had a permanent impact of the doctrines held by the church since his time. But Origen did not arrive at his theology in a vacuum; he was influenced by others as well and especially Philo. It is puzzling to note the acclaim granted this man by modern theologians when we realize how much false doctrine he introduced into the church. He was even declared to be a heretic in 533, but many theologians in this time proclaim him to be one of the greatest early church fathers. If the Roman Catholic Church in its early, formative stages declared Origen to be a heretic, on what basis do modern theologians dare to call him “great?”

Philo led the way for allegorical hermeneutics in Alexandria. “Philo of Alexandria (ca. 30 BC—AD 50) was a Jewish scholar profoundly influenced by the philosophy of the Greeks and obsessed with the use of allegory and Pythagorean numerology for interpreting Scripture. His far-fetched etymologies of proper names, as well as his use of numerical values of words, resulted in many ridiculous interpretations. To Philo, every object of Scripture possesses at least one hidden meaning waiting to be discovered. While little is known of Philo’s life, the valuable study by David Runia well demonstrates that ‘the importance of Philo’s contribution to Patristic thought lies above all in his role as a mediator between the biblical and the philosophical tradition.’ Philo was convinced that Greek philosophers such as Heraclitus, Pythagoras, Plato, and Aristotle had extracted their philosophical knowledge and wisdom from Moses and the Prophets. Being of a proud Judeo-Greco tradition, Philo attempted to prove that his Hebrew faith was compatible with a Hellenistic worldview.” [David Beale, *Historical Theology: In-Depth*, pp. 73-74].

The problem with all this is Philo did not mediate between Greek philosophy and biblical truth as this theologian Runia concluded; Philo was coopted by Greek philosophy and he replaced biblical truth with Greek thought and Greek philosophical thought patterns. What is there to mediate between pagan philosophy and the Word of God? To mediate means to “bring about (an agreement or solution) by intervening in a dispute; [or to] form a connecting link between [things]” [s.v. “mediate” in *The Oxford American College Dictionary*]. We don’t seek to find common ground between pagan Greek philosophy and biblical truth. Philosophy, all philosophy, must conform to God’s truth. Trying to force biblical truth into a compatible relationship with a Greek pagan,

philosophical worldview is rebellion. The importance of this for Christians is that from Philo, this theology continued through Clement, Origen, and Augustine. Once Augustine was accepted as a great church father and his theology was elevated to be the theology of the church, this Greek thought, to the extent it negatively affected literal hermeneutics and the development of unbiblical theology and Eschatology, became institutionalized in the church and much of it is still with us today. Amillennialism was not created by Augustine, but once he adopted it, it became, with some few exceptions, the standard, established Eschatology for the church until long after the Reformation.

Origen (ca. 185-254) was a very early theologian in Alexandria. When he was a teenager his father was martyred and the story goes that if his mother hadn't hidden his clothes he would have given himself over to martyrdom as well. He was influenced by Clement and he would, in turn, be a significant influence on Augustine. Here are some very ill advised quotes about Origen written by a modern theologian. "In his fusion of Greek thought with biblical exposition, Origen was the greatest theologian of the early Greek Church.... His *Fundamental Doctrines* sets forth Christian theology on a scale previously unknown to the church. He argued powerfully for the inspiration and authority of Scripture, though he valued allegorical and typological meanings above the literal sense.... Origen must chiefly be remembered for the power and understanding with which he developed, propounded, and defended the major doctrines of the Bible." ["Origen" in *The Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*]. These compliments are simply ill-informed and foolish. How can anyone think that Origen was a great theologian when it is clearly admitted he mixed and fused, that is, comingled and made one, his pagan Greek thought with his biblical exposition? He may have been great in the sense that he was well known and in the sense that he wrote a lot but shouldn't the positive title of "great theologian" be reserved for those who are faithful to literal hermeneutics and to the presentation of sound doctrine? Origen didn't argue forcefully for the inspiration and authority of Scripture as we know it according to literal hermeneutics. He argued for the inspiration and authority of Scripture as he interpreted the Bible allegorically because to him that was the real, true meaning. Origen made himself to be the authority over the Scriptures. Remember, allegory was first used by Philo and his contemporaries to prove Greek thought compatible with the Bible. The claim that Origen forcefully argued for the inspiration and authority of Scripture is simply wrong when you consider what he thought to be inspiration. "Origen believed the Scriptures to be "divinely inspired," but filled with contradictions whenever viewed through the lenses of literalism. He exerts incredible effort attempting to make book after book and chapter after chapter of the Bible appear as ridiculous and as laughable as possible if taken literally. If that sounds exaggerated, read the tenth book of Origen's *Commentary on John* as a starter. In it one will wonder how anyone could have fabricated such fanciful rubbish and claimed that it derived from Scripture. It

reveals the extent to which allegoristic interpretations for nearly twenty centuries and in far-reaching lands have robbed multitudes of their Bibles by turning Scripture into riddles. To Origen, though, only an allegorical interpretation could properly reflect the true meaning of any passage.... Literalism breeds heresy, and without the Alexandrians "key" of knowledge, it is impossible to understand the Scriptures [according to Origen]." [David Beale, *Historical Theology: In-Depth*, pp. 1:145-146]. Origen's theology and presentation of doctrines based on allegorical hermeneutics does not make a man a great theologian; it makes him a heretic. It is shameful that a Reformed theologian writing the entry on Origen for *The Evangelical Dictionary of Theology* dared to write such a thing. In fact, even the Roman Catholic Church, in the sixth century, declared him to be a heretic and expunged his mentor, Clement, from the ranks of the saints in the eighteenth century.

Origen embraced the extra-biblical book "Pseudo-Barnabas" otherwise known as the *Epistle of Barnabas* to the point of claiming it to be virtually canonical. This is probably due to its over the top use of typological and allegorical hermeneutics that produced some remarkably outlandish interpretations. He also thought the extra-biblical *Shepherd of Hermas* was virtually inspired. This work was very mystical and was written to document some supposed "visions" Hermas experienced.

Clement of Alexandria, Origen's mentor, has been considered a Christian Gnostic although, it seems better to refer to him as a Gnostic without the "Christian" adjective. He believed in universal salvation and he claimed that "only immature Christians think in such elementary terms as a literal or eternal fire of hell." [David Beale, *Historical Theology: In-Depth*, 1:128]. He seemed to promote baptismal regeneration which is a trap many of the early church fathers fell into. He also "established a tradition of distinguishing between the full divinity of the Father, and a lesser divinity of the Son." [Alister E. McGrath, *Historical Theology: An Introduction to the History of Christian Thought*, p. 25].

Clement's allegorical hermeneutic simply destroyed any semblance of meaning the words of the Bible were written to convey and Origen faithfully followed him. For example, "With reference to 1 Corinthians 3:10-13, Clement thinks that Paul is speaking clandestinely of Christianity as the true Gnosticism. The "gold, silver, and precious stones" constitute the true "Gnostic superstructure on the foundation of faith in Christ Jesus." The "wood, hay, and stubble" are "the additions of heresies." For Clement there is disguised allegory in Paul's warning "The fire shall try every man's work of what sort it is." Such a perceived need for an elitist and esoteric language gave rise to the term *secret instruction*, which referred to the practice of keeping mysteries of the faith as secrets from the unbaptized, even from catechumens, so that the holy mysteries could not be profaned. It was this mystical element that would inspire Origen, for Clement

himself had assured him that it was the Lord who permitted him, "to impart Divine mysteries and sacred light to those who can receive them." [David Beale, *Historical Theology: In-Depth*, 1:129]. Not only was Clement's allegorical hermeneutic on display here but so was his Gnosticism. This branch of theology runs from Philo to Clement to Origen to Augustine and it devastated literal hermeneutics, with some few exceptions we've noted, until the Reformation and most theological systems are still devastated by their doctrines. This "secret mystery" stuff that was introduced into the early church is certainly unbiblical if not overtly pagan. New converts were not allowed to join the church based on faith but only after they were proven worthy were they baptized and then introduced into these "secret mysteries."

Origen and those who followed him were amillennialists. One of the bishops of Alexandria who was an adherent of Origen's theology was named Dionysius (d. ca. 265) and he made up a flimsy story designed to deny the Apostle John's authorship of the book of Revelation. Dionysius lived less than 150 years after John died. He heard there were two tombs in Ephesus that were claimed to be the tombs of John. He made up the story that one tomb was the Apostle's and one was another unknown John who was the Elder who must have been the true author of Revelation. This is disingenuous because the Elder wrote 2 John and 3 John but the apostle John, who identified himself as the bond-servant John or simply as John in Revelation 1:1 and 4,9 wrote Revelation. Then Eusebius elaborated on this idea that the Apostle wasn't the same person as the Elder based on something Papias, who was a premillennialist and who had been taught by John himself and by John's pupil Polycarp, wrote in a book that mentioned John twice, once simply as "John" and once as the "presbyter (or elder) John" rather than as the Apostle John.

Here is what Papias wrote in a work entitled *Expositions*: "If, then, any one came, who had been a follower of the elders, I questioned him in regard to the words of the elders—what Andrew or what Peter said, or what was said by Philip, or by Thomas, or by James, or by John, or by Matthew, or by any other of the disciples of the Lord, and what things Aristion and the presbyter [elder] John, the disciples of the Lord, say."

He was almost certainly referring to the Apostle John both times, but Eusebius and those who came after him changed that second reference was to a different John, John the Elder. Following Eusebius, Jerome (ca. 347-420) taught this error as truth. This became a mainstay for the amillennial arguments designed to discredit any literal understanding of Revelation. "Dionysius, desiring to discredit the doctrine of a literal millennium, became a prototype for commentators who reject the apostle John's authorship of Revelation." [David Beale, *Historical Theology: In-Depth*, 1:40-41].

John Darby was not the first to realize the Bible's truth was presented in a dispensational, pretribulational rapture, and premillennial Second Coming manner. But through the Plymouth Brethren those doctrines became widely disseminated and many people understood them for the first time. Darby became highly influential not because he was anything special but because he was disseminating a solidly biblical Eschatology to which people had been denied for centuries. Darby reached his conclusions by reading the Bible using literal hermeneutics. We will examine his conclusions and his doctrines later, but for now we will examine his thoughts on the hermeneutics he used.

Darby was seriously injured in an accident while riding a horse and during his convalescence at his sister's home, he spent his time studying the Bible. This was in 1829 and from that point on, his doctrinal positions were set. Darby felt that his life, ministry, and beliefs were transformed and solidified during that time and he never deviated from those beliefs in any significant way the rest of his life.

Here is a sample of what the critics of Darby and his theology have said about it. "Critics of Darby have dismissed his theology as 'new doctrine', 'among the sorriest in the whole history of freak exegesis', 'a feat of the imagination', 'cunning craftiness', the 'theological equivalent of comfort food and escapist entertainment', 'a Zionism of the worst sort', 'deep anti-evangelical heresy', and 'the root from which many of the present-day heresies and vagaries have sprung'. One of the most vitriolic onslaughts comes from the pen of the radical Old Testament scholar, James Barr, who writes: 'If dispensationalism is not heresy, the nothing is heresy. In comparison with it, many of the traditional deviations commonly branded as heretical, such as Pelagianism, Monophysitism, Nestorianism and the like, are no more than minor disturbances in the flow of the entire doctrinal current of Christianity. Dispensationalism is more like Gnosticism among the traditional heresies, in that it creates almost an entire new mythology of its own, though this mythology takes the outward form of Biblical interpretation.'" [Paul Richard Wilkinson, *For Zion's Sake: Christian Zionism and the Role of John Nelson Darby*, p. 96 quoting Baker, Reese, Barr, Tregelles, Witherington III, Bahnsen and Gentry, Gerstner, and Anderson].

There are several distinct threads that give rise to these criticisms. First, is that dispensationalism and the pretribulation rapture are "new" as though that automatically invalidates them. The true hermeneutical issue, however, is does the Bible teach those doctrines? It is called "freak exegesis" because it is not in conformity with Reformed theology and its covenant of grace and its embrace of Replacement Theology. Zionism is anathema to most Christians because it denies Replacement Theology and affirms the doctrine that God still has a plan for Israel. It is charged that dispensationalists have simply made these things up out of our own imaginations. It is

called escapist because we want to avoid going through the Tribulation and we are therefore cowards. These doctrines are called “comfort food” because they are not the sophisticated, spiritual interpretations of the Scriptures that these well-educated theologians present, and they are “comfort food” because it gives people the assurance (false assurance in their view) that people will avoid the Tribulation. Dispensational theology gets blamed for many varieties of heresies today. For example, Hank Hanegraaff compares dispensational, premillennial thought with Joseph Smith’s Mormon eschatology implying guilt by association [Hank Hanegraaff, *The Apocalypse Code*, p. 44]. Those who are dispensationalists are also accused of being heretics and of promoting heresy. It is a Gnostic myth as Barr puts it although cloaked in “Biblical interpretation.” All these issues contribute to the criticisms leveled against premill, pretrib, dispensational theology.

Darby consistently insisted after 1829 that he arrived at his theological conclusions based only on literal hermeneutics. Wilkinson referenced this many times. “Darby’s eschatology was rooted in his devotion to Jesus Christ and his study of the Bible. He was thankful that he had been ‘brought up to know the Scripture’... His *Synopsis of the Books of the Bible*, first published in 1857, has been cited as ‘evidence that his mind was saturated with the Word of God’. Darby described the Bible as ‘the only secure resting-place for man amid the darkness of this world’, and as that which commanded ‘absolute authority’ for his soul.... Darby insisted that the Bible had been his sole guide: ‘I have, through grace, been by it converted, enlightened, quickened, saved. I have received the knowledge of God by it to adore His perfections of Jesus, the Saviour, joy, strength, comfort of my soul. Many have been indebted to others as the means of their being brought to God ...This was not my case. That work, which is ever God’s, was wrought in me through the means of the written word.’ [pp. 104-105].

The point is Darby developed his theology from sitting down and reading the Bible.

John Gerstner provided us with an example of the difference between a dispensational interpretation of a text versus a Reformed interpretation which he classed as the difference between literal and spiritual hermeneutics. Isaiah chapter 11 is a Scripture that clearly refers to the Messianic Kingdom existing under the rule of the shoot from the stem of Jesse. The verse in question is verse 6 and in part it says, “And the wolf will dwell with the Lamb...” which is the part of the pericope specifically in view but it would be wise to examine the context from verses 1-10.

Isaiah 11:1–10 <sup>1</sup>Then a shoot will spring from the stem of Jesse, And a branch from his roots will bear fruit. <sup>2</sup>The Spirit of the LORD will rest on Him, The spirit of wisdom and understanding, The spirit of counsel and strength, The spirit of knowledge and the fear of the LORD. <sup>3</sup>And He will delight in the fear of the LORD, And He will not judge by what

His eyes see, Nor make a decision by what His ears hear; <sup>4</sup>But with righteousness He will judge the poor, And decide with fairness for the afflicted of the earth; And He will strike the earth with the rod of His mouth, And with the breath of His lips He will slay the wicked. <sup>5</sup>Also righteousness will be the belt about His loins, And faithfulness the belt about His waist. <sup>6</sup>And the wolf will dwell with the lamb, And the leopard will lie down with the young goat, And the calf and the young lion and the fatling together; And a little boy will lead them. <sup>7</sup>Also the cow and the bear will graze, Their young will lie down together, And the lion will eat straw like the ox. <sup>8</sup>The nursing child will play by the hole of the cobra, And the weaned child will put his hand on the viper's den. <sup>9</sup>They will not hurt or destroy in all My holy mountain, For the earth will be full of the knowledge of the LORD As the waters cover the sea. <sup>10</sup>Then in that day The nations will resort to the root of Jesse, Who will stand as a signal for the peoples; And His resting place will be glorious.

“The question now becomes, how does it happen that dispensationalists have come to have the wolf and lamb actually lie down together while the non-dispensationalist sees a figure of speech? Is it a different hermeneutical principle when interpreting prophecy, as often thought? No, they both agree that Scripture should be interpreted literally if possible. Dispensationalists think this is possible and necessary in prophecy. Conservative non-dispensationalists agree that it is quite possible for God to cause wolves and lambs to lie down together but contend this is not a plausible interpretation here. They note that this passage seems to be dealing with human beings and not animals, and that it seems to refer to the present age and not some future time. They would admit that if it were not referring to humans and was referring to an era still future it would conceivably and probably have a literal meaning. The dispensationalists would admit that if it referred to human beings in this dispensation it could conceivably and probably would have a figurative meaning.

In other words, it is not the hermeneutic of literalism, even in prophecy, that makes the difference or even has any bearing on the interpretation. It is one's understanding of the context, local and general, of scriptural teaching that determines the literalizing or the spiritualizing. 'Whatever can be shown to be in its literal sense inconsistent either with purity of life or correctness of doctrine must be taken figuratively,' was Augustine's opinion.

Let us pursue this further. Dispensationalists would no doubt generally agree with what has so far been said. Whether we take wolves and lambs literally or not does indeed depend on that understanding of the immediate and general context of the Bible. It is precisely at this point that the dispensational theological system tends to push the hermeneutic in an extremely literal direction. The system will determine whether these are literal or figurative lambs and wolves. Both agree that one cannot tell from the words alone. Both agree, also, that these words should be construed literally if probable. The question is, is it plausible, given the total teaching of Scripture, to interpret

this passage as referring to a literal fellowship of wolf and lamb in a literal millennial kingdom?

We might ask ... whether there is clear evidence elsewhere in Scripture that there is to be a thousand years of perfect peace and harmony in nature in this world under the Messiah? We think, in fact, that there is not only no *clear* evidence of a millennium in Scripture, but there is no evidence.

This exercise should indicate that the question of a literal or figurative interpretation of this prophecy is not really a matter of hermeneutics *per se*, but of the understanding of the larger context of Scripture that one brings to the interpretation of any passage. It will be evident that the dispensational answers to the above questions are founded, not on any allegedly neutral rules of interpretation, but on their own theological system." [John H. Gerstner, *Wrongly Dividing the Word of Truth: A Critique of Dispensationalism*, pp. 98-99, 100].

There are so many hermeneutical and logical fallacies in Gerstner's argument it would be funny if this kind of argument didn't keep so many people from realizing Scriptural truth. The real issue here is hermeneutics despite Gerstner's denials. His entire argument is a genetic fallacy which is the act of condemning an argument because of where it began, how it began, or who began it. He condemns dispensational theology and literal hermeneutics from the start and he mischaracterizes both. The fact is Reformed theologians do not agree the Scriptures should be interpreted according to literal hermeneutics; they use a theological hermeneutic and call it literal. You may recall that a few weeks ago we learned that a Reformed amillennialist named Riddlebarger redefined our literal hermeneutic by defining it as literalism. He then claimed that reinterpreting the Old Testament with the New Testament is the true literal hermeneutic. It's interesting to note these two men cannot agree within their own system of theology what constitutes literal hermeneutics. That's what happens when the Bible is not the controlling factor for interpreting it but theology is the controlling factor. Given the variations in theology, the exegetical standard becomes fluid, flexible, and moving depending on the thoughts and whims of the interpreter.

What is the context of this Scripture? Isaiah is predicting that in the future a shoot from the stem of Jesse and a branch from his roots will rule in faithfulness and righteousness over Israel. It will be a time of such peace and safety the wild animals that formerly preyed on domesticated animals will live in harmony with them. Children will be able to lead wild animals and they will be safe among them. This pericope is talking about people AND about animals together in a peaceful Millennial Kingdom. There is no exegetical warrant for changing the meaning of the animals to human beings. There is a theological reason for changing the meaning and that is to support one's denial of a literal Messianic, Millennial Kingdom.



Gerstner argues that non-literal systems use literal hermeneutics "if possible." That's a bit of a non sequitur; it is nonsense to argue that non-literal systems use literal hermeneutics when possible. It is always possible to use literal hermeneutics; therefore, there is never a reason to use non-literal hermeneutical systems. They are totally incompatible. Besides, that is true only if their theology allows it and in this Scripture, Gerstner's postmillennial Eschatology will not allow him to let a wolf be a wolf and a calf a calf. He has to turn them into human beings because he does not believe there will be a literal 1,000 year reign of Christ Jesus on earth from the Davidic throne in Jerusalem. He doesn't believe that peaceful coexistence between man and wild animals and between what we now know in this age to be predator and prey within the animal kingdom is possible. He doesn't believe there will be a time of such peace that lions and wolves won't be killing and eating lambs and calves. He doesn't believe that poisonous snakes will not bite people and kill them. Given the context and given the nature of the Millennial Kingdom as the Bible repeatedly describes it, it is entirely possible to understand this Scripture using literal hermeneutics. Doesn't the Garden of Eden example of Adam and his relationship with animals suggest such peaceful coexistence is not only possible but the model for what is to come when things are restored in the Kingdom? Gerstner says this is "not a plausible interpretation here." Why? Because that would mean he would have to acknowledge a literal Kingdom. This point is simply manipulative propaganda. Gerstner's readers are supposed to simply assume Gerstner is being honest when he is not. It is possible to use literal hermeneutics here; his theology won't allow it.