

Weber, Timothy P.. On the Road to Armageddon – How Evangelicals Became Israel’s Best Friend. 2004. Baker Academic. Grand Rapid. MI.

A summary review

An excellent, thoroughly documented overview of the history of dispensationalism and how dispensationalists became Israel’s best friends. The book is written from a non-evangelical, non-millennialist perspective. Regretfully Weber does not openly discuss what his own theological presuppositions are. This often leaves the reader with the puzzling question as to whether he is reading a theological history, a descriptive book on the Who is Who of contemporary religious culture, a politically motivated critique of all who stand with Israel or a theologically driven exposure of the failures of those who believe in Bible prophecy. It is only toward the end that it appears that behind it all is an undercurrent of Protestant criticism of the political position of messianic Jews and prophecy believing evangelicals – read fundamentalists or dispensationalists – with regard to Israel. In case of doubt: the book’s reference to Armageddon is probably meant to be cynical and the friendship is seen as problematic.

A more detailed review

In his introduction Weber briefly defines the three major eschatological positions. The Millennialists are subdivided into Historicists and futurists (spelling?), the first believing that the book of Revelation “presents a prophetic overview of the entire sweep of church history while the second – so Weber – believes that it refers to events that will occur just before Christ’s return. Statistics quoted from Time/CNN indicate that ‘over one-third of pro-Israel Americans believe that the Jews “must possess their own country in the Holy Land before Jesus can return. This book is about them.” (p.11) Statistically, according to Weber, therefore, this book deals with the beliefs of some 15 million evangelical Americans who “interpret Bible prophecy more or less literally and put prophetic texts together in complex ways.” (p.9)

Where Weber himself stands has to be read between the lines and frequently with a second look at the beginning of each paragraph. He often begins with ‘Dispensationalism...’ without repeating that what he writes is not his own view.¹ Regretfully he does not inform the reader how the Scriptural passages guiding dispensationalist interpreters in their views ought to be interpreted correctly. It is not surprising that the author digs up as many weaknesses, contradictions and errors in prophetic interpretations as he could possibly find. His bias is evident from the fact that he does not attempt to show the “contradictions and absurdities of the allegorizing commentators” as one of the early messianic Jews would have said.² The climax of his book can only offer the suggestion, “What would happen if dispensationalists decided to follow the command of Jesus to be peacemakers and left the results to God?”³ The scarcity of references to Scripture, the use of past tense when describing even present-day

¹ P. 153: “The state of Israel was founded in Palestine. Here was verification that they had interpreted the Bible correctly and that the return of Jesus was imminent.” To give up land for peace is the worst thing that could happen: “Anyone who pushes for peace in such a manner is ignoring or defying God’s plan for the end of the age.” (p. 267) Yet this is not the author’s persuasion. The paragraph begins with the sentence: “For the dispensational community, the future is determined.” It is not surprising that behind the implied criticism of this position is the belief that Islam is merely one of ‘the three Abrahamic religions’ and that there is no difference between Judaism and Islam: “The Problems in Palestine were rooted [past tense!] in religion as well as in politics and real estate.” (p. 160)

² David Baron, p. 489. It is significant that messianic Jewish dispensationalist David Baron, Zechariah, 1918. Hebrew Christian Testimony to Israel, London. Republished by Kregel, is neither referred to in this book nor listed even once in his carefully compiled Bibliography of millennialist authors.

³ p. 267

positions (as if they belonged to an archaic era of history)⁴ and the use of insinuations makes one wonder if there is even a hidden agenda behind this book. Why is there not the slightest trace of an ‘in dubio pro reo’ admission that even the prophets of old – like those who are among the “prophecy giants” of today - were carefully searching and making inquiries, “seeking to know what person or time the Spirit of Christ within them was indicating as He predicted the sufferings and the glories to follow.”⁵

Looking at this highly informative book from a more positive angle it seems that the author may not be trying to find out what his own position ought to be. His descriptions of the religious side of American culture over the last forty or fifty years at times read like sales advertisements when he presents the biographies and literary production of bestselling authors like Hal Lindsey or Rister Jenkins and Tim LaHaye. He quotes dozens and dozens of webpages (‘electronic resources’) to help the reader find out where his resources can be found. The gyrations of prophecy interpreters between ‘absorbing minor blimps on the radar screen of history’ (p.204/205) and ‘flexibility of interpretation’ (p.209) that helped in handling the prophetic disconfirmations (like the fall of the Berlin wall and the collapse of the Soviet Empire), compared to the complete absence of even attempts at explanation of historic events makes one wonder if this is another method of advertising some preference for the dispensationalist views. After all, even Lindsey did not follow the dictum that since the end is programmed in God’s plan, nothing can be done about it. Some dispensationalists “were ready to think through the practical political implications of their views” (see p. 197). Their attempts to make sense of prophecy and history are more credible approximations to the truth than the absence of alternative explanations. The possibility of nuclear war at an unprecedented scale may even appear to be a scenario to be reckoned with quite regardless of the fact that there are passages in Zechariah, Daniel, Ezekiel and in the Apocalypse that predict the same and that can hardly be cut out of Scripture or be interpreted otherwise (p.202). Weber refers to those passages himself. At least he concedes that President Reagan’s “Star War” program “probably also contributed to the Soviet System’s collapse and its rapid movement toward democratic reforms.” (203).

The question needs to be asked: Is “Armageddon” really the red flag for the author’s eschatology – whatever it may be – or does his book seek to propagate the hidden message that after all the Biblical concept of Armageddon cannot be brushed aside? and in order to combat it he seeks to ‘explain’ how these evangelicals came to be Israel’s best friends and why these friends are seeking to make prophecy come true. Curiously this is just what makes the book worth reading: it does not present only the history of dispensationalism, it also includes the history of Jewish and Christian Zionism, of the emergence of modern Israel, of the New Christian Right, and of the Messianic Jewish movement. It presents the major

⁴ p. 157 „Dispensationalists rarely showed any interest in mining the complexities of historical cause and effect or the often unexpected consequences of human behaviour. In other words, they had a decidedly ahistorical view of history and liked to “proof text” it in order to match it to their anticipated plan. Once dispensationalists placed an event into their prophetic jigsaw puzzle, it was difficult for them to take it out.” The reader also wonders what a historical view of history looks like and whether a true Theologian ought not to be concerned about a theological view of history. – – This style becomes absurd when one reads: “Chuck Smith was a firm believer in Bible prophecy.” [no longer?]

⁵ 1Peter 1:9. Weber’s insinuations are subtle. About Lindsey’s warnings he says: “...if America took aggressive military steps, it could possibly hold the dogs of atomic war at bay until Jesus returned to *evacuate* his followers.” “At times history took a surprising turn, but Bible teachers showed an *amazing resilience*.” p. 203) [Italics are mine] “...dispensationalists have left the stands and have entered the field of play to make sure that everything follows the divine script until Jesus comes.” (212)

players, organisations and authors associated with these developments and with the premillennialist interpretation of prophecy.

One of the most problematic aspects of this book is the implicit accusation that premillennialists do not know the borderline between prophecy/prayer and politics (229). Typically, the amillennialist historian Paul Boyer is quoted to illustrate Israeli strategy, “As liberal Protestant support eroded, Israel played its fundamentalist card. Privately ridiculing premillennialist readings of prophecy as those of a six-year-old child, they recognized an important political block and dealt with it accordingly,” (221) Weber comments that “Israel’s timing was perfect... American Fundamentalists and evangelicals were discovering their political voice in the rise of the New American Right.” Weber obviously wrote his book before the “liberal Protestants” called for disinvestment – a purely politically motivated act that was a betrayal of Israel that is nearly splitting their Church.

Another inconsistency – according to Weber – seems to be that “dispensationalists saw nothing contradictory about supporting the national aspirations of Jews and trying to convert them simultaneously.” (234, 242, 244, 248) A serious criticism of the Messianic Jews is that “research has shown that few observant Jews came to faith in Christ as a result of the evangelistic efforts of Messianic congregations.” (242)

Messianic Judaism

If this book has one serious flaw, it is its implicit accusation against the Messianic Jewish Community in Israel (some 6,000 of them) because of their “lack of interest in the largest group of believers in Israel and the West Bank, the Palestinian Christians (some 145’000).” (246) This lack of interest is attributed to close ties with American dispensationalists. Why does Weber include this sentence: “...American Dispensationalists have close ties with the Messianic Jewish community in Israel,” they “know one another and communicate often” as if this was something that can only be said about messianic Jews. His criticism is that American dispensationalists neglected their Palestinian Brothers and Sisters because American evangelicals do not “engage in ecumenical enterprises. Therefore they stay clear of the Middle East Council of Churches.” (247) The worst accusation is that “dispensationalism sees Arabs as God’s enemies in the end times.” While ‘lack of ecumenicity’ in the liberal sense of the word is probably true in many cases, one wonders why Weber does not use the term ‘Muslims’ instead? (248) There is no discussion of the problems involved in the fact that Palestinians in the West Bank entertaining relationships with Jews are marked as collaborators and treated accordingly. There is no discussion either of the delicate situation in which Messianic Jews have to live in Israel.

My Conclusion

Weber’s book shows the struggle of prophecy interpreters to make sense of history. This struggle is by no means over. If Weber had looked into what is happening in the development of the European Union he would probably have reason to be uneasy. The European “Arrest Warrant” as part of Schengen II agreement not only replaces extradition between EU Member States, it removes the sovereignty of any member nation to the effect that European citizens may be arrested with no chance of recourse, if one of the EU countries accuses the person of one of presently 32 crimes (this is a dynamic law, the list being open) some of which are matters of interpretation like racism, animosity against foreigners, deceit or cyber criminality. If Turkey joins the Union and someone is critical about Islam he or she is vulnerable to be accused of racism and will have to be handed over to the Turkish Government. In view of the facts of the world we live in, if Weber means to slighthen the dangers of which dispensationalists have always warned, he unfortunately conveys the attitude of those whom

the apostle Peter quoted as saying: "Where is the promise of His coming? For *ever* since the fathers fell asleep, all continues just as it was from the beginning of creation." (2Pet 3:4) What dispensationalists have in common is that things get worse before they change to the better but Weber is silent about this issue.