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Daniel G. Hummel's The Rise and Fall of Dispensationalism: How the Evangelical Battle Over the End Times Shaped a Nation: A Review

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Daniel G. Hummel's *The Rise and Fall of Dispensationalism: How the Evangelical Battle Over the End Times Shaped a Nation*: A Review

Abstract

This review examines Daniel G. Hummel's *The Rise and Fall of Dispensationalism*, a comprehensive intellectual and cultural history tracing the origin and evolution of dispensationalist theology within Anglo-American Evangelicalism. Despite its dismissal as fringe eschatology, Hummel argues that Dispensationalism significantly shaped the Evangelical imagination and broader American culture. The review summarizes the book's key themes and highlights strengths such as scope and balance while suggesting areas for further consideration regarding transatlantic origins and minor factual errors. It concludes that Hummel provides an insightful, measured analysis of this resilient and controversial belief system but dismisses the theological movement as dead when millions still adhere strongly to its underlying tenets.

Keywords

Dispensationalism, Evangelicalism, Eschatology, Premillennialism, Rapture, Prophecy, Fundamentalism, American religion, Populist theology, End times beliefs, Millenarianism, Christian Zionism, Christian nationalism, Evangelical culture, Religious History, Theological movements, Biblical interpretation, Biblical literalism, Christian futurism, Revelation (biblical book), Apocalyptic literature

Cover Page Footnote

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This review examines Daniel G. Hummel's *The Rise and Fall of Dispensationalism*, a comprehensive intellectual and cultural history tracing the origin and evolution of dispensationalist theology within Anglo-American Evangelicalism. Despite its dismissal as fringe eschatology, Hummel argues that Dispensationalism significantly shaped the Evangelical imagination and broader American culture. The review summarizes the book's key themes and highlights strengths such as scope and balance while suggesting areas for further consideration regarding transatlantic origins and minor factual errors. It concludes that Hummel provides an insightful, measured analysis of this resilient and controversial belief system but dismisses the theological movement as dead when millions still adhere strongly to its underlying tenets.

Introduction

In *The Rise and Fall of Dispensationalism*, historian Daniel G. Hummel examines one of Evangelicalism's most influential yet contested theological frameworks. Tracing Dispensationalism from its nineteenth-century origins to its cultural entrenchment and more recent fragmentation, Hummel illuminates a belief system that has soaked into the American religious psyche despite facing sustained criticism. This review will summarize Hummel's key arguments, highlight the work's strengths, and suggest areas warranting further scholarly attention.

Summary

Hummel locates the foundations of Dispensationalism with the writings of Irish Anglican priest John Nelson Darby, who established foundational tenets like the rapture and the radical distinction between Israel and the Church. Although initially confined to the margins, the belief system gained immense popularity through early twentieth-century revivalism and mass media like the widely distributed Scofield Reference Bible. Despite facing sustained pushback from religious scholars, the theological framework permeated American culture through novels, radio, and apocalyptic projections of current events. While later fracturing between academic and populist strands, Darby's teachings remain deeply embedded in the Evangelical imagination. The most central theological doctrine of Christian fundamentalism, the teachings that shaped the eschatological hopes of the movement, did not arise from first-century beliefs, as its adherents contend, but rather from Darby. This period, often defined by the Second Great Awakening, also witnessed the emergence of several religious denominations with robust eschatological theologies, reflecting a shift away from earthly concerns towards heavenly preoccupations about preparing in this life for the world to come. In more traditional theological circles, it further marked a move from robust Calvinism to Arminianism. Under the influence of revivalist preacher Charles Grandison Finney, Baptists transitioned from a Calvinist soteriology to an Arminian foundation fueled by fervent urgency toward conversion and salvation. From within this milieu, Darby formulated an interpretive scheme of Scripture centered on Dispensationalist

Premillennialism - the belief that Christ's return would be preceded by the bodily rapture of living and resurrected saints, followed by the Great Tribulation, culminating in Christ's defeat of evil and establishment of a thousand-year earthly reign. Darby's teachings, disseminated through print media, provided the impetus for Evangelism and missions throughout the 1800s. As Dispensationalism's significant role in Fundamentalism grew, belief in the resurrection and rapture of the faithful and the literal truth of biblical prophecy became core doctrines among Baptists and other conservative Protestants. Significantly, the term "rapture" does not explicitly appear in Scripture.

Hummel does an excellent job of describing the historiography of Premillennialism, gives insight into the happenings of lesser-known adherents, and provides biographies of some of the more flamboyant evangelical leaders like Williams Jennings Bryan, who prosecuted John T. Scopes in the Scopes Monkey Trial. Hummel notes correctly the importance of the Scopes Trial as a nexus or rallying point for the youthful Fundamentalists in the early twentieth century. Concerns over German Higher Criticism, Darwinism, and Lyle's views over the age of the earth reminded Christians that times were changing, and they were not in the driver's seat.

Strengths

Hummel's exhaustive research and measured analysis represent significant strengths. Drawing on extensive primary sources, he objectively traces Dispensationalism's waxing and waning American prominence across over a century, adeptly blending intellectual, cultural, and political angles. Hummel provides nuance in assessing Dispensationalism's origins and contentious place within broader Evangelicalism. Avoiding extremes, Hummel recognizes Dispensationalism's theological shortcomings while acknowledging its cultural entrenchment.

Areas for Further Consideration

While commendable in scope, Hummel's focus on Dispensationalism as an American phenomenon obscures the transatlantic roots of nineteenth-century millenarian social pessimism that emerged in Britain before taking hold in the United States.

A major distraction is the lengths to which the author defends Calvinism as a superior theological position to Dispensationalism. The reader is continually confronted with this defense of the rising tide of present-day new Calvinist belief within Evangelicalism. This approach detracts from otherwise helpful parts of the text and leaves the sense that this defense was more the reason for the writing.

A last point should be made about the writing style and treatment of the significant adherents of Dispensationalism. While Dr. Hummel has professed his roots in this movement, his treatment of details, leaders, and basic facts is often incomplete and unclear. The subject is immense in scope, and credit is given for a good attempt, but one that leaves a reader who also has roots in the movement lacking depth and detail.

Conclusion

In providing the first full-length scholarly treatment of this theologically significant and culturally pervasive belief system, Hummel has offered insight crucial for understanding strands of modern Evangelicalism and American society. Balanced, thoroughly researched, and highly readable, *The Rise and Fall of Dispensationalism* represents an outstanding history illuminating a provocative movement. Both accessible for a general audience yet substantive for academia, Hummel's book is essential reading for scholars across disciplines interested in American religion and culture.