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INTERPRETING

Bible Prophecy

Every Bible believer would acknowledge that God is the master communicator. Through the creation He has revealed His existence, wisdom, and power. Through the Scriptures He has revealed much of His Person, plans, and purposes. But if He is the master communicator, why do we often not understand what He is saying? Intelligent people regularly disagree on what God is communicating to mankind. They fail to agree on how the universe came into existence, on how the universe will come to an end, and on most points in between those two issues! The fault, of course, does not lie with God the communicator but with man the interpreter of God's messages. And there is probably no part of God's message that is subject to more disagreement and diversity than that of Bible prophecy. Therefore, it is important for us to spend some time discussing how to interpret the prophetic Scriptures before we investigate the specifics of those events yet to come.

AMID THE CONFUSION, SOME CLEAR TRUTHS

Many Christians view Bible prophecy with confusion or cynicism. Some of them are convinced that prophecy is so complicated that only those with special gifts of insight or intellect can make sense of intricate details, such as ten-horned beasts and locusts that resemble horses but have the faces of men. Others have been exposed to enough bizarre interpretations

and failed predictions that they have retreated into “eschatological agnosticism,” pleading ignorance on prophetic matters.

This is perhaps understandable for the person who once was totally persuaded that a certain prominent politician was the Antichrist or had several times waited for the rapture to take place on specifically announced days. But as we approach the subject of interpreting the prophetic Scriptures, we need to remember several things that the Bible has clearly said.

1. Prophecy Was Given by God to Be Understood.

The apostle John began the book of Revelation with the declaration that this book was “the Revelation of Jesus Christ” (Rev. 1:1); that is, it was an unveiling of truth about the future work of Jesus the King and Judge. The Lord has revealed prophetic truth so that we will be changed by it. This presupposes that truth can be understood. If the prophetic Word is important to the Lord, it ought to be important to us as well.

2. God Has Given Us Help in Understanding the Prophetic Word.

When we were born into the family of God, we were anointed by the Holy Spirit (1 John 2:20, 27), and this anointing gives us the capacity to understand the truth of God. Prior to our conversion we had darkened minds with no real capacity to understand messages from God. Now we not only have a new capacity to understand God’s truth, but the Holy Spirit is committed to illuminating the truth of God so that we can understand it. The Spirit, who alone knows the mind of God, takes these matters and opens them to us (1 Cor. 2:11–13). If that is true, then no Christian can legitimately say that Bible prophecy is unintelligible and the exclusive domain of a few scholars.

3. God Has Given to Us His Scriptures.

The Scriptures given by God through writers are verbally inspired (2 Tim. 3:16; 2 Peter 1:19–21). The very words of Scripture are critical. Contrary to the view of some, God did not simply toss out an idea and have a human author develop the thought. The very words of all Scripture, including those prophetic portions, are significant and worthy of our time and attention.

This should motivate us to investigate Bible prophecy and do our best

to understand this message that God has communicated to us: a message He clearly wants us to understand. As the apostle Peter put it, “We have the prophetic word made more sure, to which you do well to pay attention” (2 Peter 1:19).

FOUR PRINCIPLES FOR PROPER INTERPRETATION

With those realities in mind, here are four principles for sound interpretation of biblical prophecy.

1. Interpret the Prophetic Passage Literally.

Of all the rules for interpreting prophecy, this is the most important. But, when we speak of interpreting literally, what do we really mean, since it is obvious to everyone that many prophetic portions are loaded with symbols and figures of speech? We interpret literally when we approach the words of a Scripture passage in the same basic way that we would any other literature or any ordinary conversation.

For example, if I told you that I just saw three brown dogs in the alley, you would interpret that statement literally. You would not seek to find hidden meaning in my comment but would assume that I saw three (not five) brown (not black) dogs (not cats) in the alley (not in the park). Not to interpret literally in everyday life would render our communication confusing and fundamentally useless. And our approach to the prophetic Word is very similar.

The literal method of interpretation is that method that gives to each word the same exact basic meaning it would have in normal, ordinary, customary usage. . . . It is called the grammatical-historical method to emphasize . . . that the meaning is to be determined by both grammatical and historical considerations.¹

“To determine the normal and customary usages of Bible language,” wrote Paul Tan, “it is necessary to consider the accepted rules of grammar and rhetoric, as well as the factual historical and cultural data of Bible times.”²

Literal interpretation assumes that, since God wants His revelation understood by people, He based His revelatory communication on the normal rules of human communication.

Literal interpretation understands that in normal communication and in the Scriptures figures of speech are valuable as communication devices. Again, if I were to say to you, “I was sitting in the backyard the other evening, and there were millions of mosquitoes out there,” you would immediately recognize “millions” as a figure of speech (in this case, a hyperbole), realizing that I did not count the mosquitoes but was simply saying that there were a large number of them. You would interpret my statement within the normal use of language. If a person declares, “I’m freezing!” we take that statement normally. We do not assume that their body temperature has dropped to 32 degrees but, rather, that they feel very cold. Literal interpretation is not, therefore, a rigid “letterism” or “mechanical understanding of language” that ignores symbols and figures of speech. In light of the many symbols and figures of speech in Bible prophecy, we need to further define the literal (normal/usual/customary) approach to interpretation.

Literal interpretation is to be the basic, primary way of approaching the texts of Bible prophecies. Generally speaking, literal interpretation is a system based on the grammatical-historical approach of hermeneutics. (*Hermeneutics* is the science of biblical interpretation. It sets forth the laws and principles that lead to the meaning of the Scripture text.) Whenever we come to a prophetic passage, our commitment must be to understand that passage according to the accepted laws of language and not to seek some mystical or figurative interpretation.

One author encourages the interpreter of Scripture to “commit [himself] to a starting point and that starting point is to understand a document the best one can in the context of the normal, usual, customary, traditional range of designation which includes ease of understanding.”³ For example, when God said to Abraham that He would give him and his descendants the land of Canaan for an everlasting possession and that He would be their God (Gen. 17:8), how should we approach that passage? Literal interpretation would see it as a promise of God regarding a relationship and a land area. Literal interpretation would take this statement at face value and not seek a mystical meaning, for there is nothing in the passage that would compel one to do so.

This general approach provides the foundation for true interpretation. However, it is not the whole story, as Elliott Johnson observes:

What we have discovered is that a normative principle must be a general principle, but a general principle cannot legislate a particular sense or senses. Rather a general principle can only specify general limits to a textual sense. Thus our definition of literal would be appropriately designated as a system of limits. This system specifies the general maxim . . . that any sort of text is consistently interpreted in its own context. As an example, “serpent” as a word normally means “animal” and only an animal. But this normal usage and sense does not legislate that “serpent” in Genesis 3:14 must mean merely an animal. On the other hand, a literal system begins with recognizing “serpent” as an animal. Then it looks to the immediate or extended contexts for other clues to the meaning. This serpent speaks (3:1–5), and speaks as the enemy of God. Thus in the literal system, this serpent is more than an animal; it is God’s enemy. . . . The value of this literal system is that it specifies a normative role for the textual contexts in interpretation and a normative practice of interpretation. It thereby excludes ideas extrinsic to the text.⁴

It is essential, therefore, to have this literal mind-set as we approach the prophetic Word of God. Without it there is no reliable check on an interpretation, and the interpreter becomes the final authority. If in Genesis 17:8 the land of Canaan does not refer to a specific piece of real estate in the Middle East, to what does it refer? Can it refer to heaven or the church? Such ideas would come from outside the text of Genesis 17:8. But when such spiritualizing or allegorizing takes place, the interpretation is no longer grounded in fact, and the text becomes putty in the hand of the interpreter.

Our basic approach to God’s prophetic Word, therefore, must be a literal one. Once inside this literal system, we deal with specific words and phrases. Should we take a particular word literally or symbolically? Sometimes it is easy to make such a choice.

When John 1:28 tells us that John the Baptist was baptizing at the Jordan River, we have no interpretive problem. When the next verse records the statement that Jesus is the “Lamb of God,” we have no interpretive problem with that either. We immediately recognize that the word *lamb* is used in a figurative way to communicate truth about the real man Jesus of Nazareth. When Isaiah prophesied that “a shoot will spring from the stem of Jesse, and a branch from his roots will bear fruit” (Isa. 11:1), we are dealing with figurative expressions of a literal person—Jesus Christ. “It will

thus be observed that the literalist does not deny the existence of figurative language. The literalist does, however, deny that such figures must be interpreted so as to destroy the literal truth intended through the employment of the figures. Literal truth is to be learned through the symbols.”⁵

Symbols are valuable tools of communication. Symbols communicate truth concisely, and they communicate it graphically. In Revelation 11 the apostle John could have spent a great deal of time describing the spiritual and moral condition of Jerusalem. Instead, he called the city “Sodom and Egypt.” Quickly and vividly he communicated a volume of truth that remains graphically fixed in our minds.

Symbols and figures of speech, then, represent something literal. It is the task of the interpreter to investigate this figurative language to discover what literal truth is there. But there will not always be agreement on some figures of speech:

*There may be discussion by literalists as to whether a given word or phrase is being used as a figure of speech, based on the context of a given passage. Some passages are quite naturally clearer than others and a consensus among interpreters develops, whereas other passages may find literal interpreters divided as to whether they should be understood as figures of speech. This is more a problem of application than of method.*⁶

For example, in Revelation 2:10 the church at Smyrna is warned that they would have “tribulation [for] ten days.” Does the “ten days” refer to a week and a half of intense trouble, or does it symbolize a brief period of time or perhaps ten periods of persecution? This church was literally headed for persecution, but whether or not the ten days is to be understood literally is a point of discussion among literalists.

In Revelation 8:8, John says that one-third of the sea became blood as a result of a judgment from God. Does a part of the ocean actually become real blood? Or should the blood be seen as representing some aspect of this judgment that is yet unclear? Bible students differ on the literalness of this verse. But such differences do not indicate some basic inconsistency in a literal approach. Rather, as noted above, the issue is a problem of application, not method. Because we have different backgrounds, training, and experiences, we will have differing viewpoints on specific details, such as whether the blood of Revelation 8:8 is literal or

not. But all literalists will likely be in agreement that this verse is telling us of some terrible judgment to come. So even if they did not agree on the literalness of the blood, they would not leave the literal approach and spiritualize this prophecy, seeing it as a picture of religious delusion coming on the world (Lenski) or the invasion of the Roman Empire by the Vandals (Barnes).⁷ These allegorical interpretations illustrate that, when the literal interpretation of prophecy is abandoned, there is a lessened accountability to the text itself.

Those (such as amillennialists) who resist this principle of literal interpretation adhere instead to the spiritualization of prophecy. A spiritual (or allegorical or mystical) approach treats the literal sense as secondary to a deeper, more spiritual meaning. Those who spiritualize prophecy work on the principle that these portions of the Bible have a hidden meaning. They assume that the literal approach obscures the real, deep meaning of the passage. However, abandoning the literal as the primary meaning is a terribly arbitrary way to approach the prophetic Scriptures. As Bernard Ramm observes, “The curse of the allegorical method is that it obscures the true meaning of the Word of God.”⁸ It should be added that most objectivity in biblical interpretation is lost, since one allegorical interpretation is as valid as another. Why should not Barnes’s interpretation that the third trumpet judgment (in the Revelation 8 passage) refers to the Vandals’ invasion be just as authoritative and valid as Lenski’s idea that the third judgment speaks of a coming worldwide religious delusion?

Though conservative amillennialists faithfully use the literal approach of interpretation in most other doctrinal areas, they have chosen to approach prophetic passages with spiritualization. So, for instance, instead of seeing Jesus Christ ruling in the future over the nation of Israel on this present earth, they say His rule is a spiritual one in the hearts of those who belong to His church. This spiritualizing seems especially out of place when it is combined with a literal approach to a passage such as Luke 1:31–33.

In that passage, the angel Gabriel informed Mary that she, a virgin, was to have a son who would rule on David’s throne over the nation of Israel. Amillennialists interpret the statement about the birth using the literal approach and arrive at the conclusion that Jesus was physically born of the virgin Mary. But they then spiritualize the second part of Gabriel’s statement concerning the rule of Jesus, making Jesus’ rule not over the “house

of Jacob” on “David’s throne” but over redeemed saints in the church of Jesus Christ. A consistent literal approach, letting language be language, will avoid such an inconsistent and somewhat arbitrary approach to the Scriptures. This example highlights the inherent contradiction of using two different systems of interpretation.

The first and great interpretive rule, then, is to interpret prophetic passages literally. “The literal system is necessary because of the nature of Scripture. First, Scripture is *sufficiently clear* in context to express what God promised to do. Second, Scripture is *sufficiently complete* in context to establish valid expectations of the future acts of God.”⁹ It is the literal approach to the Word of God that provides a solid, reasonable approach to interpreting the prophetic Scriptures.

2. Interpret by Comparing Prophecy with Prophecy.

God did not give all prophetic information to any individual prophet. Rather, through many authors over a period of centuries the prophetic picture developed and became more complete. Therefore, to gain a fuller understanding of a prophetic subject and to avoid erroneous conclusions, it is needful to compare prophecy with prophecy. The apostle Peter said that “no prophecy of Scripture is a matter of one’s own interpretation” (2 Peter 1:20). Peter’s point includes the idea that no prophecy found in Scripture is to be interpreted by itself but, rather, in reference to everything God has said on the subject.

The future millennial kingdom is spoken about in Revelation 20, where it is said to last for a thousand years. But we would be headed for serious error if we assumed that all God has said about this aspect of the kingdom is found in Revelation 20. The prophets of the Old Testament have spoken volumes on the subject of the millennial kingdom, and, in order to understand Revelation 20 correctly, it is essential to visit Isaiah, Daniel, Jeremiah, and others to learn what they have said.

If all we studied on the subject of the Antichrist was Daniel 7, we would not get a complete picture, for the apostles Paul and John have significant points to contribute. Since God is the author of the entire prophetic Scriptures, we must assume that no prophecy will contradict another. God is not the author of confusion and clearly will not contradict Himself as He sets forth things to come. When faced with difficulties, therefore, we need to remember this inherent unity of meaning in the Bible and keep in

mind that difficulties are not contradictions. We must also assume that one passage may contribute to the understanding of the other, since God is the author of both.

Often New Testament authors will refer back to Old Testament prophecies. They do this for a variety of reasons, including to show that a prophecy has been fulfilled and to tie together a previously given prophecy with the one being given to the New Testament writer. Whereas the New Testament message could give a deeper or clearer understanding of the Old Testament passage, that Old Testament portion does explicitly or implicitly include the same message. For example, three times the prophet Daniel speaks of the “abomination of desolation.” Daniel’s prophecies give information about the timing of the event as well as some characteristics of it. But the Lord Jesus’ statement in Matthew 24 is certainly valuable in clarifying a number of issues related to this phrase.

But an interpreter cannot disregard the statements of the Old Testament as if they are inferior to deeper, spiritual New Testament meanings. Passages such as Isaiah 2:2–4, which speak of a marvelous golden age to come on this present earth, must not be disregarded by means of spiritualization. Concerning the amillennial spiritualization of such Scriptures, one postmillennial writer observes that they leave “a whole continent of prophecies unexplained, many of which then become quite meaningless.”¹⁰ Old Testament prophecies must be allowed to speak. Their message will be enriched and enhanced by later New Testament prophecies but not negated or changed by them.

So, then, it is imperative that the interpreter of prophecy compare Scripture with Scripture. By so doing, a more complete and accurate picture is seen of what God is going to do and perhaps how and why He is going to do it.

3. Interpret in Light of Possible Time Intervals.

When the prophets proclaimed God’s message, they frequently were unaware that there was going to be an interval of time between prophetic fulfillments. “In such passages, the sacred writer, as he foresaw these events in his day, viewed them in the distance of time like peaks of a mountain range, without realizing that valleys of time lay between them. This is true especially concerning events in the first and second advents of Christ.”¹¹ When a prophet placed several events side by side in his message,

that did not necessarily mean that the fulfillment would occur at the same time or that one fulfillment would immediately follow the other.

For example, Zechariah spoke of the first advent of Christ, when He would come “endowed with salvation, humble, and mounted on a donkey” (9:9). This was fulfilled at the triumphal entry into Jerusalem. But without hesitation the prophet went on to say that Messiah would reign over all the earth (v. 10), which will not be fulfilled until His second coming. It is highly unlikely that Zechariah knew that the fulfillment of his two statements would be separated by several thousand years.

The same is true of other prophets. Isaiah spoke of Christ coming “to bring good news to the afflicted . . . to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to captives . . . to proclaim the favorable year of the Lord” (Isa. 61:1-2). Jesus Himself interpreted this passage in Luke 4:16-21, indicating that these words referred to His first-advent ministry. In fact, Jesus stopped His reading in the middle of a sentence and commented that those words were presently being fulfilled. But the Isaiah passage goes on to speak of “the day of vengeance of our God,” which speaks of activities at His second advent. Did Isaiah imagine an interval of thousands of years between those two clauses? Probably not.

This telescoping phenomenon is found a number of times in the prophets and reveals gaps in prophetic fulfillment. A key passage that we will investigate later, Daniel 9:24-27, contains a gap that is critical to a proper interpretation of that prophecy. It is, of course, only in the progress of God’s revelation that we can see such intervals of time between prophetic fulfillments.

4. Interpret Figurative Language Scripturally.

Communications research shows that we understand and retain far more information when we can *see* it along with hearing it or reading about it. Since the prophets did not include charts and graphs in their prophecies, and since they did not have PowerPoint, they had to rely on the language that they used. Though some did on occasion use props and act out their messages, language was still their primary tool. The use of symbols as a communication device became quite important to the message they were giving. As already mentioned, figures of speech and symbols represent something literal. In attempting to discover the meaning of these symbols, it is helpful to note three different interpretive categories of prophetic

symbols: (1) the immediate context, (2) the larger context, and (3) the historical-cultural context.

First, we should consider the immediate context. Some symbols are interpreted in the text by the prophet himself. At other times an interpreting angel appears in the text to explain a particular symbol, or the Lord Himself reveals the meaning to the prophet.

In Revelation 17:1, the apostle John sees a “great harlot who sits on many waters.” Some of this imagery is explained later in that chapter, when John is told by an angel that the “waters” represent the many peoples and nations of the earth (v. 15). In Ezekiel’s famous vision of the “dry bones,” the Lord reveals that the dry bones represent the entire nation of Israel (Ezek. 37:11). The explanation of this symbol has undoubtedly saved us from hours of endless debate and discussion on the subject.

Second, we should consider the larger context. A second category of prophetic symbols involves those whose meaning is suggested by other Scriptures outside of the immediate text. A large number of symbols and figures of speech have been used in one place in the Bible, then used in another place by another writer. It is no surprise to find Daniel, for example, using a symbol found in Isaiah, who wrote more than a century earlier. New Testament writers had the symbolic wealth of the Old Testament to draw on, and under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, the final author of the Old Testament, they employed many of these symbols. This is especially true of those symbols found in the New Testament book of Revelation where

a count of the significant allusions which are traceable both by verbal resemblance and by contextual connection to the Hebrew canon number three hundred and forty-eight. Of these approximately ninety-five are repeated, so that the actual number of different Old Testament passages that are mentioned are nearly two hundred and fifty, or an average of more than ten for each chapter in Revelation.¹²

With statistics like that it becomes pretty clear that a knowledge of the Old Testament is essential to an understanding of the book of Revelation and crucial in keeping an interpreter from getting involved in prophetic speculation and excesses.

In Revelation 12:14, for example, the woman is given two wings of the great eagle to escape from the serpent. The chapter itself points to the

woman representing the nation of Israel and the serpent being Satan. But what are the wings of the eagle? Does it mean that in the last days Israel will be rescued by an airlift? Probably not. The imagery of the eagle's wings is found in Exodus 19:4 and in Isaiah 40:28–31 and speaks of the care and deliverance of our powerful and loving God. Revelation 12:14 teaches that God will rescue His people in those last days just as He did at the time of the exodus out of Egypt. The passage reveals *what* God is going to do but not *how* He is going to do it.

Another example can be found in Revelation 11:3–4, where the text speaks of God's two witnesses who are "the two olive trees and the two lampstands that stand before the Lord of the earth." No interpretation of Revelation 11:4 can hope to be valid if it does not carefully investigate Zechariah 4, where that symbolism is found. Prophetic symbols, then, are not an invitation to let one's imagination run wild. The symbols found in Scripture and then used by other writers of Scripture do set parameters for interpretation. Symbols do not give an interpreter freedom to apply any meaning he wants to a text.

Third, we should consider the historical-cultural context. Some symbols are related to the historical-cultural times of the writer. Those symbols do not find meaning in other sections of Scripture but, rather, in the days of the writer himself. For example, the "white stone" found in Revelation 2:17 and the "pillar" in 3:12 come from the cultural context of John's day. To understand in a clearer way the message of the Lord in those sections, it would be helpful to learn the meaning of those symbols as they were understood in John's day.

SOUND PROPHETIC INTERPRETATION

Hopefully this brief discussion of some of the rules of prophetic interpretation has highlighted the importance of our hermeneutical principles. Without clear interpretive principles guiding us we will not arrive at clear interpretations. The prophetic Scriptures can be difficult because they deal with events that have not happened as yet. Prophecies that have been fulfilled completely have been fulfilled literally, and that gives us confidence to expect that those prophetic utterances that are not yet fulfilled (or completely fulfilled) will also end up being fulfilled literally. We believe that Jesus Christ will literally return to this earth and reign at His second

coming because He literally came to this earth the first time, being born of the virgin Mary at Bethlehem.

As we study the prophetic word we must do so with personal diligence and with a conscious dependence on the Holy Spirit, the author and illuminator of the truth of God. When we do this we may well develop some strong convictions about Bible prophecy. It is not wrong to have firmly held beliefs about prophecy, even though some might suggest that strong convictions reveal narrowness of thinking. Strong convictions may well reveal clarity of thinking. But holding firmly to our own eschatological position does not give us license to personally and caustically attack fellow believers who adhere to differing positions. Unfortunately, anger and arrogance have accompanied eschatological discussions in the past and in the present. To question a position in light of Scripture is certainly legitimate. But to attack the one who holds that position, questioning his or her intelligence and character, is clearly a different matter. As we hold to our viewpoint, we need to reflect the Lord Jesus, who was full of grace *and* truth.