

The Erroneous Interpretation of Prophecy

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The main difference between the Chiliasts and those who do not hold their view, is centered in the method of Scripture interpretation. If all prophecy must be interpreted in a literal way, the Chiliastic views are correct; but if it can be proved that these prophecies have a spiritual meaning, then Chiliasm must be rejected. Therefore, first of all, the question here presents itself, how must this prophecy be interpreted? We shall endeavor to solve this question by seeking the answer of Scripture itself.

How Not to Interpret Prophecy

Before entering upon this discussion we do well to observe that prophecy cannot always be determined by the interpretation the recipients may have put upon it. The Bible plainly teaches that often those who received the prophecy and even the prophets who gave it to the people, were not always able to distinguish between the form and the substance of that which they revealed. In Dan. 8:26, we read, "Wherefore shut thou up the vision, for it shall be for many days." Likewise in Dan. 12:7-8, "And I heard but understood not: then said I, O my Lord, what shall be the end of these things?" In those passages the prophet himself testifies that the prophecy was not revealed to his own understanding. Turning to the New Testament we find that the apostle Peter speaks in the same way, "Concerning which salvation the prophets sought and searched diligently, who prophesied of the grace that should come unto you: searching what time or what manner of time the Spirit of Christ which was in them did point unto, when it testified beforehand the sufferings of Christ, and the glories that should follow them" I Pet. 1:10-11. That also the people did not always understand the revelation is implied in what our Lord says, "And now I have told you before it come to pass, that when it come to pass, ye might believe" (John 14:29). The content of the revelation must therefore exclusively be measured by the intent and meaning of God Himself, and not by the recipients, or even the prophet's interpretations.

Old Testament Theocracy a Picture of The Future State

We see that the great principles of Israel's theocratic life were expressed in an earthly external form, because only in these forms could the principles be brought to the mind of the people. They were already contained in the Mosaic institutions, but their completion still laid in the future. We must continually bear in mind that in the Old Testament, church and state are

together. To belong to the Jewish nation also included the membership in the Old Testament church. God Himself was not only king of Israel as a nation, but also king of His Old Testament church. The whole life of the covenant people was preeminently God-centric. Circumcision was a sign and seal of the Covenant of Grace as well as a badge of membership in the commonwealth of Israel.

The whole theocratic life of Israel was a prefiguration of the future state when God shall receive the full glory and honor of all His saints; when Christ shall come again and sin and all its dire consequences shall be completely banished from the earth. Dr. Vos says of this, "The great basic principles that shape Israel's life now, will then shape it completely. Notice how this is concretely put in the Old Testament, as there the future eschatological theocracy is the absolute counterpart of the present theocracy. Its central seat will be in Jerusalem; it will have subjected the nations; it will therefore be a universal reign of God over all with the form and the organization of the present theocracy" (From Class notes in Eschatology of the O.T.).

In this fact we find the correct solution relative to the purpose of God conveyed in the prophecies of the Old Testament. The future state is described in terms and colors taken from the present Old Testament theocracy. This gives us a portrayal of the future world. Israel is a type of the true Church of God. The whole prophetic language becomes intelligible only when viewed in the light of eschatology. The Messiah shall then have universal control over land and sea, and the remotest regions of the earth belong to His empire. War and destruction shall be no more. The great principles and ideas found in the Old Testament theocracy shall surely reach their completion. God will be all in all. The future state is pre-eminently God-centric. Of this truth the Old Testament theocracy was a type.

Fairbanks says in respect to this, "The prophets necessarily thought and spake under the conditions of their own historical position; so that it was not the image of the future which threw itself back upon the past, but rather the image of the past which threw itself forward on the future. The things which were and have been gave their form to the things which were to come" (Fairbanks *Prophecies*, p. 465).

Prophecy to be Explained According to its Nature

The predictions of the Old Dispensation can only be properly understood when viewed in the light of the fuller revelation of the New Testament. The prophetic prose must be explained according to its own nature. When Isaiah speaks of the Messiah as a tender plant, as a root out of a dry ground, or when he speaks of the Lord's elevating the hill of Zion to the top of the hills, or that one of a city and two out of a tribe shall be brought back, that all will be sprinkled with pure water, and that they will be purged from sin, that the mountains shall drop down new wine and the hills shall flow with milk, then everyone immediately feels that this is a poetic description that cannot be taken in the literal sense. The prophets themselves were conscious that they were using highly poetic language. With the names of Sodom, Gomorrah, Edom, Moab, Philistia, Egypt, Assur, and Babylon, they often designated the power of the unregenerate world. That the prophets borrowed their figures from the usages and institutions of the Old Testament cannot be questioned. We see that the Messiah is often called David, the Church is spoken of as Zion, His people are called Israel, Canaan is often a type of heaven. The loss of God's favor was expressed by saying that they forfeited their inheritance, restoration of His favor was described as their return to the promised land.

Error of Rigid Literalism

“The broad outlines, at least, of the prophecies appear to us sufficiently clear; and we believe that a sound method of study will give the humble student who is willing to put a stern check on his imagination and follow the leading of the exegetical hints alone, an adequately exact understanding of its chief details,” (Warfield’s *Biblical Doctrines* p. 608). To interpret all that the prophets say of Jerusalem as referring to the earthly city, or to say that Israel always means the Jewish nation, would be to bring down heaven on earth and to transmute Christianity into the corrupt Judaism of the apostolic age. The author of the Hebrews speaks of the Old Testament ceremonies as something that “serve unto the example and shadow of heavenly things, as Moses was admonished of God when he was about to make the tabernacle: for, See, saith he, that thou make all things according to the pattern shewed to thee in the mount,” Heb. 8:5.

The literalism insisted by the Chiliasts is a wrong and impossible system of interpretation. It requires that David in his own person shall reign over the renovated earth and that Elijah was to come in his person. This is precisely the way the Jews interpreted the prophecies of the Messiah’s coming. Since this method was shown to be entirely wrong in explaining the prophecies concerning Christ’s first coming, it would be the height of inconsistency to apply it once more in exactly the same manner to His second coming.

Old Testament Understood in Light of New

There is a prevailing tendency running through the whole Old Testament to exhibit the new dispensation under the image of the old. We do not erase the prophetic meaning when we maintain that that which is said of Zion or Jerusalem or of the temple and its sacrificial worship of the Theocracy and the many blessings promised to Israel in the old covenant, have reached their full realization in the New Testament church. Thus we throw fresh light upon these predictions. They receive a new life for us and the shadows and symbols of the old dispensation like the whole economy to which they belong become for us “the testimony of Jesus.” From all this we may, however, not infer that there is no literal fulfillment of prophecy whatsoever. When Micah prophesied that the Messiah was to be born in Bethlehem it was literally fulfilled. But even there the fact in its completion meant a great deal more than the exact literal fulfillment. It is especially a prediction of Christ’s humble birth. Frequently the context or other parts of Scripture make clear the way in which we are to understand prophecy. So for example, Ezekiel presents the last vision of the brighter future all under the aspect of the rebuilt temple which is perfect in structure and arrangement. John in his last vision of Revelation speaks of this as the Holy City, complete in its proportions and composed of the most precious stones, but having in it no temple. Scripture must be explained by Scripture and one prophecy must be interpreted in the light of the other.

“Many would have us choose definitely between the literal and the spiritual interpretations so-called, of prophecy throughout. But we decline to do so. We have no desire of being caught in this trap. The antithesis is false. No sensible expositor of Scripture follows either to the exclusion of the other. The fact is that literal and spiritual elements lie interlinked in prophecy. A single verse may contain both. Sometimes the two are easily distinguishable. In other cases we shall not be able to distinguish them with certainty until the light of final fulfillment has dawned.”

(R. B. Kuiper "While the Bridegroom Tarryes" p. 203).

Correct Principle of Interpretation

The question then presents itself, how can we determine the intent of God in His prophecy? We are here in a very fortunate position, as we can determine the mind of God in this particular by our knowledge of the New Testament fulfillment of prophecy. In the New Testament the form is clearly thrown off, and the substance remains. An adequate exegesis of the Old Testament prophecy is possible only on the basis of the New Testament data. We can therefore derive our method of interpretation for the unfulfilled prophecy from the fulfilled, because we may safely deduce the guiding principles for the unfulfilled prophecy from the fulfilled predictions which are recorded in the New Testament.

Rigid Literalism Weighed and Found Wanting

Let us therefore, first of all test this principle of literal interpretation by the prophecy which has already reached its fulfillment in the New Testament. (1) In the *first prophecy* uttered into the ears of fallen man, the Lord addressing the serpent said, "And I will put enmity between thee and the woman, and between thy seed and her seed; he shall bruise thy head, and thou shalt bruise his heel." If all this must be taken in prosaic style, the seed of the woman would naturally mean the woman's offspring, a child of promise, or collectively a line of children to be born of her. Consequently the serpent can only be the creature of the field then present. This primeval promise would then contain nothing more than an assurance of man's relative superiority to the most subtle beast of the field. From later revelation it is evident however, that the seed of the woman is here Christ who by His suffering, death and resurrection bruised the serpent's head. The serpent is Satan. Cf. Rev. 20:2.

(2) We shall refer to a few *other Messianic Prophecies* in connection with this. Micah, e.g., predicts that out of Bethlehem was to come forth He that was to be ruler in Israel, the Messiah, the king of Zion. But it is held as a settled point that the Messiah has not yet appeared as a ruler over Israel, since the Premillennialists claim that Christ's kingdom begins with His second coming. In like manner it may be maintained that Jesus must still make good the prophecy of Zechariah by riding into Jerusalem on an ass, since it was distinctly as king of Jerusalem that the act in question was to be performed.

(3) *We fear that according to this interpretation a large portion of the Messianic ministry which the Evangelists have described as finished according to the Old Testament prophecy, must be regarded as still in the future.* For when, according to the prophecy of Isaiah, was He actually anointed to preach the Gospel to the poor? We also do not read of the literal fulfillment of the Psalmist's words respecting Him, of His ears having been bored, or His sinking in deep waters where there is no standing.

By accepting this literal interpretation we must come to the conclusion inevitably that the humiliation of our Lord has been accomplished only in part. The New Testament plainly teaches everywhere that it is the fulfillment of the Old Testament. The symbolism of the Old Testament pointed to something greater than a mere literal fulfillment. In Col. 2:11 we find the meaning of the true circumcision, as Paul there speaking of Christ says, "In whom also ye are circumcised with the circumcision made without hands, in putting off the body of the sins of the flesh by the

circumcision of Christ.” Likewise Paul speaks of the Old Testament passover as having reached its fulfillment in Christ, “Purge out therefore the old leaven, that ye may be a new lump, as ye are unleavened. For even Christ our passover is sacrificed for us,” I Cor. 5:7. In like manner we are told the meaning of the Old Testament sacrifice in Eph. 5:2, “As Christ also hath loved us, and hath given himself for us an offering and a sacrifice to God for a sweetsmelling savor.” So also the true people of God are called Israel, “And if ye be Christ’s then are ye Abraham’s seed, and heirs according to the promise,” Gal. 3:29.

(4) *The spiritualization of the present external form of prophecy did not begin in the New Testament however. It is already present in the Old Testament prophecy.* In Is. 66:23 we read that all the nations shall return to Zion on every Sabbath and on every new moon. Surely no literalist can deny the symbolism here. Many of the prophets already had the conception of a spiritual priesthood. Isaiah, with one single exception (9:25), gives a spiritual representation of the priesthood. Jeremiah declares the Ark of the Covenant is no longer to be remembered. Both Isaiah and Jeremiah declare that in the future the entire people will have access to God, Is. 5-1:13; 61:6; 66:21; Jer. 51:3-1. All of the prophets thought of the people of Jehovah as a true priestly people.

Hosea, foretelling the approaching bondage and captivity, represents it as a returning to Egypt, because it will be similar to the Egyptian bondage. He afterwards clearly shows that he actually does not refer to the country Egypt, by mentioning Assyria as the region where the humiliating discipline was to be experienced, and even with apparent contradiction to the former announcement declares that they would not return to Egypt, Hos. 8:13; 9:3; 11:5. The prophets often predict that Israel shall return to Zion. This is especially the case in the eschatology of the Psalms. In Psalm 47 the Land of Canaan is called the glory of Jacob whom he loved. Usually the thought rests on Zion as the centre of the Theocracy, Ps. 9, 15, 23, 27, 46, 48, 74, 79, 102. It is to be noticed, however, that in these eschatological prophecies, *eternity* is predicted whereas Premillennialism believes Christ’s kingdom to last a thousand years. In Ps. 72:17 we read, “His name shall endure for ever: his name shall be continued as long as the sun: and men shall be blessed in him: all nations shall call him blessed.” Likewise in Ps. 125:1, “They that trust in the Lord shall be as mount Zion, which cannot be removed, but abideth forever.” There the eternity of Jehovah becomes a pledge for the eternal abode of His people in His presence. So also we read in Ps. 132:12, 13, 14: “If thy children will keep my covenant and my testimony that I shall teach them, their children shall also sit upon thy throne for evermore. For the Lord hath chosen Zion; he hath desired it for his habitation. This is my rest forever: here will I dwell; for I have desired it.” And again in Ps. 146:10: “The Lord shall reign for ever, even thy God, O Zion, unto all generations.”

If these prophecies are to have a literal fulfillment then it is evident that they cannot refer to the Millennium, as these Psalms do not predict something transitory, but eternal. If the Chiliasts desire to appeal to these passages they must eternalize Zion. Dr. Hodge says, “The argument from the ancient prophecies is proved to be invalid, because it would prove too much. If these prophecies foretell a literal restoration, they foretell that the temple is to be rebuilt, the priesthood restored, sacrifices again offered, and then the Mosaic ritual is again to be observed in all its details. Such an interpretation renders one part of God’s Word inconsistent with the other part,” (*Systematic Theology* Vol. 3, pp 808). To say that every prophecy shall be fulfilled in a strictly literal sense is inconsistent with the Scriptural presentation. We therefore reject the literal interpretation of prophecy because it contradicts the applications made of prophecy in both the Old and New Testament and if consistently carried out it renders one part of God’s Word in contradiction to the other.

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