

QUESTIONS WE WANT ANSWERED

55 Is Prophetic Language Literal or Figurative?

INTRODUCTION

1. Implicit in the nature of things is commencement, continuation and consummation.
2. The Bible speaks of origins, (Genesis 1:1) and of God's providence and preservation. All phenomena fulfill His purposes and He energizes the process. (Nehemiah 9:6) Accordingly, history moves toward a consummation which God has ordained. (I Corinthians 15:24)
3. Consummation truth or prophetic teaching is complex. Biblically literate Christians will be produced only by study and working at rightly dividing the word of truth. (II Timothy 2:15)
4. The question of interpretation is basic. Christians of equal devotion to Christ and confidence in the integrity of Scripture hold different views about Christ's coming. In no area of Christian doctrine are diversities so many as in the area of Biblical prophecy.

I. THE PREPARATION OF THE INTERPRETER:

A. Mentally:

The faculty to perceive the meaning of prophecy is God given. Such illumination and interpretation belongs to those whose minds have been prepared by God. It is God's Word and He will tell us what it means through the master teacher He has sent, the Holy Spirit. (I Corinthians 2:11-12)

B. Attitudinally:

In Matthew 11:25-26 we read that understanding comes to the seeker who approaches God's truth with child-like openness.

C. Intelligently:

The Apostle Paul urged young Timothy to rightly divide (orthotomeo: to cut a straight line) the word of truth. (II Timothy 2:15) Not everyone can be a scholar in the formal use of the word, but all can search the Scriptures and make use of tools such as Bible dictionaries, grammars, commentaries and

concordances. The more one studies, believes and obeys, the more one will understand. There is no end to study and research.

D. Sympathetically:

Differences of opinion among Christians regarding prophecy are primary and secondary. There are four views of the millennium which are held, and three basic attitudes concerning the tribulation. There are five conservative views of the meaning of Babylon. Let us be persuaded as we are able to ground our position in Scripture, but may the truth be held in love toward those who differ with us. The world will know we are Christians by the way we love one another, not by our particular slant on eschatology. (John 13:35)

II. THE PROPOSITIONS OF THE INTERPRETER:

A. There Is a Focal Point:

A person integrates Scripture. Jesus Christ and His redemption. i.e. His person and work, is the theme of the Bible. One passage which clearly states this truth is Ephesians 1:4-5. God's ultimate goal will be realized through Christ. (Ephesians 1:10, 3:5-6, 9-11)

B. Truth Culminates in the New Testament:

Hebrews 1:1-2 tells us that *"God, who at sundry times and divers manners spake in time past unto the fathers by the prophets, hath in these last days spoken unto us by his Son, whom he hath appointed heir of all things, by whom also he made the worlds."* The New Testament interprets the Old. The New Testament fulfils the old. Old Testament truths are eternal, their mode of application was temporal. (II Corinthians 3:14-16)

C. Prophecy Is Not Its Own Interpreter:

Didactic passages (instructional or expository) interpret symbolic passages. Didactic language relates to what is familiar and known, visions and symbols are uncertain. When symbols, allegories, and visions are found, the truth to be conveyed is either to be found in the context or in related passages found elsewhere in the Bible. The meaning of prophecy should be found in Scripture itself.

D. The Purpose of Prophecy Is Not to Satisfy Our Curiosity:

Prophecy has as its purpose the promotion of God's purposes in our lives. While there is a certain mental satisfaction in knowing what the future holds,

other purposes have priority in Scripture. There is a close relationship between prophecy and godliness. (I John 3:3; Matthew 16:24, 27; Colossians 3:4-5; I Thessalonians 5:2-6; I Peter 1:13, 4:7; Matthew 25:19-21; Hebrews 10:36-37) Also, there is emotional stabilization in times of sorrow. (I Thessalonians 4:16-18)

E. Prophecy Reserves the Right of Delayed Fulfillment:

Some prophecies refer to more than one event though the events themselves may be separated by great periods of time. The best known example of this is that of Isaiah 61: 1-2 and Luke 4:16-21. Jesus' reading of the passage recognized the lapse in time by reading the portion which had to do with His first advent. Jesus omitted, *"And the day of vengeance of our God."*

F. Some Prophecies Have a Double Reference:

Isaiah 7:14-16. There is a law of double reference in prophecy. A sign was needed to reassure Ahaz that God would deliver Jerusalem from a siege. The sign was connected with the birth of a son. (Isaiah 8:1-4) This was a partial fulfillment. The complete fulfillment came through the virgin's birth of Jesus in Matthew 1:22-23.

G. The Context Of a Prophecy Is Important:

This includes the historical, logical and literary context. God's promises are not given indiscriminately. Promises of blessing are not for apostate or faithless people.

III. THE POSITION OF THE INTERPRETER:

Two basic convictions are held regarding the interpretation of prophecy. There is the literal method of interpretation and the allegorical method. The literalist interpretation means to explain the original sense of a writer according to the normal, customary, and proper usages of words and languages. It is therefore called the Grammatico-Historical Method. (**The Interpretation of Prophecy;** Paul Lee Tan; pp. 29)

The allegorical method "regards the literal sense as the vehicle for a secondary, more spiritual and more profound sense." (Protestant Biblical Interpretation; Bernard Ramm; pp 21)

A. Literal Interpretation:

This view is held because, **(1)** It is the normal approach in all languages. **(2)** Secondary meanings depend for their existence on previous literal terms. **(3)** The greater part of the Bible makes sense when interpreted literally. **(4)** On demand the literalist approach yields to the use of symbols. **(5)** It is the only safe check on man's imaginations. **(6)** It is necessary to the nature of inspiration. (Allis; **Prophecy/Church**; pp54)

B. Allegorical Interpretation:

This view is held because figurative language is used in scripture. (Isaiah 55:12) **(2)** Old Testament prophecies are understood spiritually in the New Testament. (Galatians 3:29; Romans 2:28-29; Philippians 3:3; Galatians 3:7; I Peter 2:9-10) **(3)** Scripture itself contains allegories. (Galatians 4:21-31) **(4)** The Church is not a parenthesis. **(5)** The New Testament writers recognized prediction as symbolic and figurative.

CONCLUSION:

Is prophetic language **literal or figurative**? The answer is that it is **both literal and figurative**.

Alan B. Christensen, Pastor, Hope Evangelical Free Church, Wilton, CT,
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