

# The Interpretation of Biblical Prophecy – By Dr. Oral Collins



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“Blessed are those who hear, and who keep what is written. . .” (Rev. 1:3; Luke 11:28, John 12:47). The verb “to hear” in this context means “to be informed,” and implies understanding. The crucial question for the earnest Christian reader is the question of hermeneutics—*How* do I hear? By what approach and by what interpretive methods do I arrive at a useful understanding of so strange and complex a book? How can I chart my course among the multifarious interpretations offered for each aspect of the prophecy? The young Christian in your church may well say, “That is easy! I will follow \_\_\_\_\_ (put your name [of your favorite Bible teacher] here). He sounds very reasonable.” You may decide to go along with Scofield, or perhaps with Elliott.

But the serious student will want to study the Biblical text and develop his personal understanding with some assurance. To do this, it is absolutely necessary to know and apply sound principles of biblical interpretation.

Hermeneutics is the theory and methodology of interpretation, especially the interpretation of biblical texts. – (Definition from Wikipedia.)

The difference between general hermeneutics, which applies to any literature, ancient or modern, and biblical hermeneutics is not fundamentally a difference in principle. The same general laws of language and communication apply to both. Similarly, the difference between the interpretation of biblical prophecy and the interpretation of other parts of Scripture is not a fundamental difference in principle. But prophecy is as different from historical narration or from epistolary style as poetry is from prose. Moreover, apocalyptic is a still more specialized literary mold. The peculiar difficulties of prophetic interpretation involve (1) an acquaintance with the common thought forms and structures of prophetic and apocalyptic literature as distinctive and literary types, and (2) an acquaintance with the specialized vocabulary, especially the symbols, in which apocalyptic prophecy is expressed.

## **GENERAL HERMENEUTICS**

Many serious errors in prophetic interpretation arise out of lack of regard for general principles. These principles are inherent in language communication and are generally agreed upon by authorities on hermeneutics. They may be summarized as follows:

1. Ordinarily, no one text may have more than one meaning. (The legitimate exception to this rule arises when there is evidence that the author makes a play upon a word which has more than one meaning; cf. Jn. 3:3, "again"/"from above.") This principle is essential to the integrity of language as communication.
2. The meaning of a text should be that which is most natural from the standpoint of the historical and cultural background, including the linguistic and cultural orientations of both the author and the original reader in the particular historical times in which it was written.
3. The meaning of a text should be that which most naturally harmonizes with its context—what precedes and what follows.
4. A text should be interpreted with due respect for the literary structure and style of the larger passage of which it is a part.
5. The sense derived from a text should be that which results from a proper and full grammatical explanation of the language.
6. *Words* should be understood according to their various meanings as established and known through customary usage. This principle applies whether words are used literally or figuratively. In the latter circumstance, the figure should be either intrinsically obvious or else commonly known through usage. The literal meaning of a word is its primary or ordinary sense. An extension of Rule Six is the principle that the literal is to be assumed unless there is indication in the passage that figurative usage is involved. Any text can quickly be reduced to nonsense if arbitrary word meanings are introduced.

## **BIBLICAL HERMENEUTICS**

Biblical hermeneutics is complicated by the fact that the Bible contains sixty-six books written in three languages by many authors over a span of fifteen hundred years. The linguistic and cultural background, as well as some understanding of the history of the entire period, is a prerequisite to a thorough study and exegesis of biblical texts. Although it may often prove helpful "to compare Scripture with Scripture," where questions of interpretation are involved, this should be done with awareness of the relationships between the meaning of words and the background of the particular texts. It should not be assumed, for example, that the original readers of the Epistle of James (ca. A.D. 45-50) had access for purposes of clarification to the Epistle to the Romans (A.D. 57-58).

Our approach to biblical hermeneutics assumes a supernatural view of the Bible as holy scripture—the divinely inspired and therefore true Word of God.

This presupposition of biblical hermeneutics is derived principally from the teachings of Jesus (Matt. 5:17, 18, John 10:35, *et al.*). It is, as we should expect, reiterated by the Apostles (2Tim. 3:16, 2Pet. 1:21). Rule one below results directly from this approach. Rules Two–Four also follow from the Judeo-Christian concept of Scripture as divine revelation.

1. A correct interpretation of any text will not stand in essential contradiction to any other statement of Scripture.
2. A doctrine which appears definitely though only once has equal authority to those which are frequently reiterated, and may not therefore be altered by unhermeneutical treatment of the text.
3. Since God has revealed His Word progressively in history, we may expect that later texts will, in some cases, supplement those which are earlier.
4. The illumination of the Holy Spirit by means of which the Word of God is received should not be understood as contraverting the normal mental processes (thereby avoiding in a mystical fashion the general principles above), but rather as a quickening or renewing of those faculties, so that they may function with greater freedom from the presuppositions, prejudices, and other encumbrances of the sinful human nature. (Rom. 12:2).

#### **THE HERMENEUTICS OF PREDICTIVE PROPHECY**

The interpretation of prophecy is involved especially with the prediction of events which were future from the standpoint of the original composition. Such predictions may still await fulfillment or they may have been fulfilled at some time now past. Although the general meaning of unfulfilled prophecies may be determined from the text, the full meaning may not be evident until the event predicted has actually occurred. It may be presupposed that the actual fulfillment of the prophecy in history will offer a correct alternative to previous misinterpretations. For this reason, it is to be assumed that the process of interpretation is necessarily dynamic and progressive, every generation being responsible to study the prophecies and to discern the signs of its own times (Matt. 16:3).<sup>1</sup>

Several principles for the study of prophecy require particular consideration:

1. It is necessary first to reiterate a fundamental general rule of interpretation. Even prophecy must be allowed its ordinary, or common sense. William LaSor states: "The literal interpretation of a prophecy is the only basis of objectivity. Without it, any interpreter, with his own system, can make any prophecy mean anything..."<sup>2</sup> A literal interpretation accepts common figures of speech and symbols according to the manner in which they were likely to have been known and understood in the days of the writer. To the extent that certain prophecies may have been intentionally veiled, it is reasonable to suppose that certain symbols may have been intended as veiled to the original reader, but as known in the day when the prophecy is unveiled.

2. It is necessary to distinguish between conditional and unconditional prophecy. A conditional prophecy, if the condition is never met, will not be fulfilled. An example of such is Moses' promise to Israel of God's blessings upon the nation pending her obedience (Lev. 26:3-13). To determine whether a prophecy is conditional, we are dependent upon the language of the text. For example, Zechariah 14:4, which states in terms unqualified either by text or context, that one day the Lord shall stand upon the Mount of Olives cannot be discarded as conditional prophecy as some have done.<sup>3</sup>

3. It is necessary to discover and give attention to biblical interpretations of biblical prophecies. These must give direction to any related prophetic exegesis. Some interpretations are explicit, as Daniel's interpretation of Nebuchadnezzar's dreams, or Jesus' interpretation of Isaiah 61 (Luke 4:18-21). Others consist only of allusive references which must be searched out, such as Daniel's quoting of Deuteronomy 32:34 (9:24) or Jesus' allusion to the Days of Vengeance of Deuteronomy 32:35, LXX; Lu. 21:22.

4. It is necessary to study prophecy systematically throughout the Scriptures. Prophecy is interwoven with redemptive history and, therefore, is largely progressive and developmental by nature. As E.P. Cachemaille well states, "We must begin at the beginning, and work onwards; not at the ends, and work backwards."<sup>4</sup> The great prophecies of Moses in Leviticus 26 and Deuteronomy 28 are fundamental to an understanding of Daniel 9 or Matthew 24. Parallel prophecies must be searched out and compared, as for example those of Ezekiel 36-48 and Zechariah 9-14.

5. It is necessary to distinguish between the message of the prophet and the fulfillment. Ideally, the meaning of the prophecy should first be determined, after which the question of fulfillment should be considered. It is, however, true that exegetical considerations which remain obscure or ambiguous may be clarified immediately when the broad outlines of the particular prophecy are recognized as fulfilled. But the interpreter must resist the temptation to adopt unnatural interpretations in order to accommodate a particular prophetic system or a particular historical fulfillment.

6. It is necessary to recognize the first complete fulfillment of a prophecy as the true fulfillment. Some are telescopic with the result that fulfillment will occur partly at one time and partly at another. An example of this is Joel 2-3, a partial fulfillment of which occurred at Pentecost (Acts 2:16-21). This is commonly called double fulfillment, which suggests a double meaning. The integrity of prophecy may be at stake in the question of first fulfillment. See, for example, John the Baptist's question of Jesus, "Are you he who is to come, or shall we look for another?" Jesus' reply pointed up the fact that he had indeed fulfilled certain prophecies of Isaiah (Matt. 11:4).

The question of fulfillment presupposes that *the student of prophecy also is a student of history*. One cannot discover the fulfillment of Daniel 11 without learning in some detail about the wars between the Seleucids and the Ptolemies in the third and second centuries B.C., and neither can he know which prophecies of the Apocalypse have been fulfilled without a study of the history of the church from the days of the Apostle John. "The true church of Christ has a perpetual interest in all the events of history, and if

patiently and reverently followed, no study will more richly repay the devout disciple with spiritual profit and delight" (Cachemaille, p.11).

## THE SPECIAL HERMENEUTICS OF APOCALYPTIC PROPHECY

1. It is necessary to identify the literary type. First, Daniel and Revelation are expressions of the apocalyptic dream-vision format. (An early biblical model, in some respects analogous, is Joseph's dream [Gen.37:9-10].) Several of Daniel's visions, where the form is more developed, carry their own interpretations. In this classic form of dream vision, future events are portrayed as if experienced in symbolic representation, consecutively one after the other, representing the progress of history from the time of the prophet (or some other *indicated* time) and extending into the future, usually to the end time.

2. It is necessary to recognize that biblical apocalyptic is *real* prophecy, concerned with real, temporal, mundane, future events which from the author's standpoint are subject to future fulfillment; *not* merely a disclosure of principles which govern history or which are expressed as if they were future events.

3. It is necessary to recognize the characteristic concern of Apocalyptic with the dualism of two world kingdoms, the rule of God and the rule of Satan, of Christ and Antichrist. Thus we are normally and legitimately involved with such mundane matters as the course of nations, world politics, and human warfare (cf. Dan 11).

4. It is necessary to distinguish between prophecies delivered to Israel as the Covenant nation (Daniel) and those delivered to the church (Revelation), but at the same time to recognize that the Gentile church now is "grafted in," i.e., included within the Covenant framework of Israel.

5. It is necessary to cope with the dramatic symbolism of the apocalyptic. Symbols were derived from the commonly known and understood language of the ancient Orient. It has been learned recently from Ugaritic literature that some go back to Canaanite mythology (seven-headed hydra or sea dragon). Others were probably originally Babylonian and Persian. Some were astrological (sun, moon, and stars of Joseph's dream), others heraldic (beasts of Daniel 7). Greek mythology had many such composite monsters, such as the sphinx (lion-like creature with wings and a human head), the chimaera (fire-breathing monster with a lion's head, goat's body, tail of a snake), or the minotaur (half-bull, half-human). All were enemies of mankind. Numbers may be used as symbols, as for example, the number 666 (Rev. 13:18), where each figure has alphabetic value, or the "70 weeks" of Daniel 9, where the 70 "sevens" means 490 years. Only a very naive approach to Daniel or to Revelation would attempt to take the symbols with concrete literalism. Interpreters have little trouble with the beasts, but sometimes slip into hyper-literalism in more comfortable imagery like the rider on the white horse in Revelation 19 or the falling of the stars in Revelation 6. A study of the interpreted visions of Daniel is essential for developing our hermeneutics for Revelation.

## THE YEAR-DAY PRINCIPLE FOR INTERPRETATION OF NUMERICAL PROPHECIES

One of the more controversial principles of prophetic interpretation is the year-day Principle. This is the principle whereby chronological designations such as "day," "week," or "month" are understood to be used symbolically. Interpretation presupposes that "day" or one of its derivative multiples used as a symbol means year or a corresponding multiple of years, so that one "day" means one year, one "week" means seven years, and so forth. The year-day Principle is explicitly indicated in several Old Testament texts (cited below), and is commonly applied to the Seventy Weeks prophecy of Daniel 9, but it is often rejected in the interpretation of the Apocalypse. The following evidence strongly supports a more general respect for the year-day Principle as an option for interpreting Chronological allusions in apocalyptic prophecies than is often allowed.

1. The principle has the support of the nearly unanimous voice of Protestant interpretation, especially with regard to the 70 weeks of Daniel 9, from the Apostolic Church to modern times. The current scepticism is characteristic of the anti-supernaturalistic attitude of our time. The negative attitude of some conservatives, especially in reformed circles, is the result of their generally simplistic approach to prophetic study.

2. The symbolic character of the Apocalyptic visions favors a symbolic approach to the numerical chronologies which they contain. Note also that the year-day formula is an appropriate mask for the long periods of time involved. (The 1000 years of Revelation 20 may be literal since it occurs after the Second Advent of Christ and need not be veiled.)

3. The principle of counting years for days is clearly established in non-apocalyptic portions of the Old Testament. This is probably the source upon which the Apocalyptic usage is predicated.

(1) Num. 13:25, 14:34. "According to the number of days which you spied out the land, forty days, for every day you shall bear your guilt for a year, even forty years, and you shall know my opposition.

(2) Ezek. 4:4-6. Ezekiel was to lie on his left side 390 days for the iniquity of Israel and on his right side 40 days for the iniquity of Judah, "for I have assigned you a number of days corresponding to the years of their iniquity." (390 = B.C. 721-Alexander's conquest of Mesopotamia). (40 = B.C. 587-537, Restoration of Judah under Cyrus).

4. The principle is used in the 70 weeks prophecy of Daniel with regard to the appearance of the Messiah. This, though not explicitly interpreted in the prophecy ("seventy sevens") is accepted by some authorities as standard lexical usage (*shabu im* = weeks [of years]). The 490 year period extends from 458 B.C. to 33 A.D. (see, e.g., the RSV)

In all occurrences of the year-day symbolism a period of judgment is predicted, suggesting that Num. 14:34 is the prototype for subsequent usage. Much Apocalyptic draws upon the analogy of Exodus. In using the year-day principle it is important to distinguish between interpretation and

application. Interpretation is concerned with the "year" as a symbol in the text and utilizes a 360 day year. *Application* applies the meaning of the text to history and involves real,  $365\frac{1}{4}$  day years.<sup>5</sup>

We have now concluded our brief summary of principles for the interpretation of biblical prophecy. We first introduced as presuppositional some principles of general hermeneutics, then offered special principles for interpreting prophecy, followed by a statement of some of the more specialized requirements of apocalyptic hermeneutics. The thoughtful student of biblical prophecy will raise many questions which will require further, in-depth study of hermeneutical method. In no other aspect of biblical study will his method more largely predetermine the results of his quest for biblical truth.

## NOTES

I. See H.G. Guinness, "Progressive Interpretation, *The Approaching End of the Age.*"

2. "Interpretation of Prophecy," *Hermeneutics*, Grand Rapids: Baker, 1967, p. 99.

3. E.g., A.E. Hatch, *Handbook of Prophecy*, Mendota, Ill.: Western A.C. Pub. Soc., 1913, p. 80.

4. *The Visions of Daniel and of the Revelation Explained*. London: Seeley, Service, ca. 1918, p. 4.

## READINGS

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Further readings on the hermeneutics of biblical prophecy may be found in the following standard works:

1. Louis Berkhof, *Principles of Biblical Interpretation*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1952), pp. 148-54.

2. D.R. Dungan, *Hermeneutics (Cincinnati: Standard, n.d.)*, pp- 270-400.

3. A. Berkeley Mickelsen, *Interpreting the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1963), pp- 280-305.

4. Bernard Ramm, *Protestant Biblical Interpretation*, 3rd ed. revised. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1970), pp. 241-75.

Readings on the year-day principle may be found in:

1. Albert Barnes, *Notes on Revelation* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1949), pp. xi-xxviii-.

2. C.H. Hewitt, *The Seer of Babylon* (Boston: Advent Christian Publication Society, 1948), pp. 413-20.

Also see J. Barton Payne, *Encyclopedia of Biblical Prophecy*, "The

Interpretation of Biblical Prediction" (New York: Harper, 1973), pp. 1-144.