

The Hermeneutics of Prophecy

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The prophets of the Old Testament offer such a bewildering diversity of pictures of the future that the reader must ask how we are to understand them. One of the most appealing views because of its simplicity is that all prophecies are to be interpreted literally. This is the hermeneutics of Dispensationalism.¹ The student of prophecy can gain a precise picture of God's purpose for the future by carefully piecing together all the prophecies in the Old Testament into a complete mosaic.

However, a careful reading of the prophecies results in such diverse pictures of the future that a strictly literal hermeneutic is difficult. Some prophecies look forward to a simple picture of earthly bliss in which the hardships and evils which attend nature will be removed and the earth will become marvelously fruitful. Amos pictures a day when the earth will become so fruitful that there will be no interval between reaping and sowing, but only an unending, unbroken fruitfulness of the land. "The mountains shall drip sweet wine, and all the hills shall flow with it" (Amos 9:13). Any visitor to Palestine who has seen the terraced hillsides with their tightly-packed vineyards will appreciate this language of marvelous fruitfulness.

On the other hand, another of the earliest prophets, Zephaniah, has a very different picture. Instead of a simple and beautiful transformation is to come a fearful devastation.

"I will utterly sweep away everything from the face of the earth," says the Lord. "I will sweep away man and beast; I will sweep away the birds of the air and the fish of the sea. I will overthrow the wicked; I will cut off mankind from the face of the earth," says the Lord. . . . In the fire of his jealous wrath, all the earth shall be consumed; for a full, yea, sudden end he will make of all the inhabitants of the earth (Zeph. 1:2-3, 18).

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1. See Charles C. Ryrie, "The Hermeneutics of Dispensationalism," in *Dispensationalism Today* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1965), pp. 86 ff.

If we are to take these words with exclusive literalness, it means the total end of human and animal existence upon the earth. In the words quoted, nothing is excluded from destruction. Human sinfulness has become so great that no recourse remains except to destroy in righteous judgment all that God has created.

That this cannot be the prophet's meaning is clear from what follows. Out of this all-enveloping judgment is to emerge a purified people, who will be gathered home in their land in blessing.

Seek the Lord, all you humble of the land, who do his commands, seek righteousness, seek humility; perhaps you may be hidden on the day of the wrath of the Lord (2:3). For I will leave in the midst of you a people humble and lowly. They shall seek refuge in the name of the Lord, those who are left in Israel; they shall do no wrong and utter no lies, nor shall there be found in their mouth a deceitful tongue. For they shall pasture and lie down, and none shall make them afraid (3:13).

This redeemed, purified remnant will not only be gathered together with restored fortunes (3:20), but will also witness a marvelous salvation of the Gentiles.

Yea, at that time I will change the speech of the people to a pure speech, that all of them may call on the name of the Lord and serve him with one accord. From beyond the rivers of Ethiopia my suppliants, the daughter of my dispersed ones, shall bring offerings (3:9).

That greatest of the prophets, Isaiah, presents equally diverse prophecies. In two of the most famous of all biblical prophecies, he foretells a day when a Davidic King shall rule over all the earth in peace and righteousness, destroying evil and purging the earth of wickedness. Peace is restored to the world as it is now constituted.

The wolf also shall dwell with the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the kid; and the calf and the young lion and the fatling together; and a little child shall lead them (Isa. 11:6).

On the other hand, Isaiah sees a very different future in the passing away of the old order and the creation of a new earth and of new heavens, when "the former things shall not be remembered or come to mind" (Isa. 65:17). However, the picture is still very "earthly," for there is still death and sin in the new redeemed order (Isa. 65:20). At least, this is the meaning if these words are taken literally.

Ezekiel has yet a different picture, describing the consummated Kingdom of God in priestly terms of a magnificent temple. Dispensationists who insist upon a literal interpretation insist that this is a forecast of

the millennial temple where restored Israel will worship God. However, this literal interpretation is plagued by the problem of the Messiah. Featured in this prophecy is a prince who shall receive the offerings of his people, who shall provide offerings for the sins of his people, and who "shall provide for himself and all the people of the land a young bull for a sin offering" (Ezek. 45:22). This prince, married with children of his own (46:16), is clearly identified:

They shall dwell in the land where your fathers dwelt that I gave to my servant Jacob; they and their children and their children's children shall dwell there forever; and David my servant shall be their prince forever (Ezek. 37:25).

This problem has driven Dispensationalists to speculate that this Davidic prince is a representative of Christ on earth, while Christ Himself reigns from a throne suspended in the air during the millennium.

Another illustration of the impossibility of interpreting the Old Testament in simple literalistic terms is the picture of the river of life. In Ezekiel 47, this river flows from beneath the threshold of the temple, which in Ezekiel is *not in Jerusalem* but stands apart by itself, eastward toward the Jordan valley. It is a marvelous river indeed; after a third of a mile, it is ankle deep; after two-thirds of a mile, it is knee deep; after another third of a mile, it is thigh deep; after another third of a mile, it is a river too deep to wade. If the river grows thus in symmetrical proportion, one must ask, if this is a literal picture, how large the river becomes after two miles, after three, by the time it reaches the Jordan. It would seem that the entire Jordan valley is destined to become one vast sea of fresh water.

On the other hand, Zechariah has a very different picture of the river of life. "On that day living waters shall flow out from Jerusalem, half of them to the eastern sea and half of them to the western sea" (Zech. 14:8). These flow from Jerusalem, while Ezekiel's river flows from the Temple which stands by itself south of the Holy City. One must ask: will the Kingdom of God be inundated by three mighty rivers, or are these simply diverse ways of describing the same reality: the river of life?

Such questions provide their own answer. Out of this survey emerges this hermeneutical principle: The prophets paint pictures of the future using colors of present, known, earthly experience. They are trying to describe a perfected order in imperfect terms. When Isaiah writes that the lion shall eat straw like the ox (Isa. 11:7), are we to understand that he means, literally, that carnivorous animals like the lion will become herbivorous, with flat teeth for grinding rather than sharp teeth for tearing, and with a transformed digestive tract? Or does he merely mean to say that the curse of violence and destruction will be lifted from nature? Surely, the latter.

This leads to a second hermeneutical principle which we can only

state now without exposition: the Old Testament must finally be interpreted by the New Testament. One illustration: the Old Testament knows three Messianic figures. Isaiah 9 and 11 picture a Davidic King who arises from among men, who rules over the earth not only with mercy and justice but with irresistible power. "He shall smite the earth with the rod of his mouth, and with the breath of his lips he shall slay the wicked" (Isa. 11:4). Daniel sees in a vision one like the son of man who represents the people of God, who receives on their behalf a kingdom, and who reigns, together with God's people, forever (Dan. 7). It is, of course, debated whether this figure is a single person or only a symbol for God's people; we believe it is the former, but one standing in solidarity with God's people. However, this is not the Messiah (i.e., the anointed Davidic King); he is an undefined heavenly being, unnamed, who receives the Kingdom. Again, Isaiah has an unnamed figure who redeems his people by humility and suffering, who will make many righteous by bearing their iniquities, who will inherit "a portion with the great" because he poured out his soul to death and bore the sin of many (Isa. 53). Again, this is not, in Isaiah, either the Messiah or the heavenly Son of Man, but an undesignated figure in the indeterminate future who will redeem his people through his sufferings. In the Old Testament, these three figures are unrelated to each other, and *Judaism never knew how to relate them*. It was the revelatory mission of Jesus of Nazareth to show that the role of all three Messianic figures was to be combined in Himself. The Old Testament prophecies can be understood only in light of their fulfillment in the mission and ministry of Jesus.

There are, however, several constants throughout biblical eschatology, even though the form of their expression takes diverse forms. The Kingdom of God always comes through divine visitation. It is not the work of man; it does not belong to an extra-mundane realm; it comes through the coming of God to man on earth. Greek thought, which influenced the theology of such learned Jews as Philo, conceives of salvation as the flight of the soul from this evil earthly order to the world of God. Biblical thought, by contrast, always pictures God coming to man on earth. One of the most descriptive phrases in contemporary scholarship of God is that He is "The God who Comes." The Old Testament pictures this in terms of a majestic theophany when creation is shaken by the mighty visitation of God. The New Testament retains this theophany in the Parousia of Christ; but it adds to it a divine visitation in the Incarnation of Christ in which God brings to men in the present historical order the blessings of His divine reign. Theologically, the difference between the Incarnation and the Parousia of Christ is quantitative and not qualitative, if such words may be used to describe such sublime realities. The Incarnation is an invasion of history by God no less than the Parousia, and embodies the theology that man can know the blessings of God's reign and deliverance from sin and evil only on the initiative of God.

By virtue of this same fact, the Kingdom of God in its final form is always an earthly Kingdom, even though the descriptions of this Kingdom differ widely. This same difference is found in the New Testament as well as the Old; Paul looks forward to the redemption of creation from the bondage of decay to share the glorious liberty of the sons of God (Rom. 8:21), while Peter describes the dissolving of the elements of the world with fervent heat. But this is not for the destruction of the world, but for the emergence of new heavens and a new earth wherein dwells righteousness (II Pet. 3:12-13). Here are two elements which are emphasized in different degrees throughout the Bible: The final theophany will mean the shaking of the present order in judgment, not to bring about its destruction but to bring about a new redeemed order.

The corollary of the redemption of creation is the resurrection of the body. Redemption is never conceived of merely as the salvation of the soul and the deliverance of the spirit from its entanglement in the world. Rather, man is a creature, standing in a real solidarity with creation as a whole; and it is therefore the purpose of God to redeem His entire creation. Even though the Bible does teach that the soul or spirit does survive the death of the body (II Cor. 5:8; Phil. 1:23), this is only a temporary situation; man is a dynamic entity and therefore demands the redemption of his total being.

It is obvious that in this short paper we can only mention some of the outstanding hermeneutical principles in the interpretation of prophecy and eschatology. The problem is that of communicating in ordinary human language that which is really ineffable. The same problem is illustrated in what the New Testament teaches about the resurrection body. Resurrection is one of the central doctrines of the New Testament; Paul devotes one of his longest discussions to it (I Cor. 15), but nowhere is the slightest effort made to describe the actual composition or nature of the body. Paul satisfies himself with stating that it will be imperishable, glorious, powerful (I Cor. 15:44), a body completely energized and animated by the Holy Spirit (a "spiritual" body). Jesus taught that the resurrection body will transcend the dynamics of sex (Luke 20:35), but when we appreciate the role of sex in the sociology of the family and society as a whole, and in human psychology, as well as human physiology, we cannot concretely conceive of this redeemed state. However, we know that Christ was raised from the dead in a marvelous body which transcended ordinary limitations, and because of the transcending glory of that which shall be when God's kingdom has come and His will is done on earth as it is in heaven, we look forward to the consummation of God's redemption promises, even though we can as yet see in a glass darkly. Therefore, we must interpret the language of prophecy and eschatology with great care and with great humility.