

SPECIAL STUDY THREE

FUNDAMENTAL PRINCIPLES OF INTERPRETATION OF O.T. PROPHECY

Abridged from *Prophecy Interpreted* by John P. Milton

I. Times Coloring, or, Historical Contemporaneity

The First significance of prophecy is as a message for the prophets own day.

- A. The function of the prophet was first of all that of a preacher and teacher of the will of God.
- B. The message of the prophet reflects and reveals something of the historical situation to which it is directed. It clothes itself, as Riehm has so well said, in "local color" or "times-coloring."

It may have a significance that goes far beyond the immediate situation; but our first task in interpretation is to ascertain what it meant for the faith and hope and religious life of those who lived within that historical situation, and to whom the prophet was sent as a spokesman of God.

- C. Even the predictive element must be interpreted from within this framework or a religious message relevant for the day and situation.

Under no circumstances have we the right to treat O.T. prophecies as disjointed parts of an eschatological picture puzzle to be assembled later without regard to historical origin.

II. Covenant Background

- A. The covenant is a major theological idea in Biblical religion. The covenant has to do with God's redemptive activity in history.
- B. The covenant not only presupposes that God is active in human history, but also that there is a purpose with and a goal to His activity. From a study of the covenant making by God from Abraham to Christ we can see that God's purpose from the beginning was a redemptive one, and that it is operative both in judgment and in salvation.

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C. A right understanding of the covenant will help us in rightly interpreting prophecy, for every prophecy must be seen within the setting of the covenant promise and hope, it should be studied against the background of the covenant of blessing with Abraham, which through Moses became the national covenant with God's people Israel and through Jesus Christ found fulfillment in a universal covenant. This covenant is more than a mere material blessing.

The prophets were concerned with more than a nation and a land. They were concerned with spiritual things. They were not religious innovators. They believed in the covenant which God had made with their fathers, and they interpreted the present as well as the future in the light of this covenant from the past. But their understanding of the true nature of the covenant, and their interpretation of the situation that confronted them, was primarily religious rather than political.

III. Eschatological Significance

Because the covenant presupposes a divine activity in history which looks forward to a goal, there is a forward-looking or eschatological aspect also to all prophecy (a perspective)

A. It is to the divine purpose revealed in the covenant that the predictive aspect of prophecy attaches itself.

The prophets were not predictive sharpshooters who sought merely to satisfy human curiosity with respect to the future. They were preachers who sought to renew faith in the ultimate fulfillment of the promises stated and implied in the very making of the covenant with Abraham and with Israel.

B. Since predictive prophecy is rooted in the covenant it may be wider in scope than specific prediction. There is a distinction, for instance, between the Messianic hope and the Messianic promise expressed in the form of a definite prediction, but both look to the future.

There is a difference between the enunciation of a divine principle of judgment, which may find repeated expression in history, and the prediction of a specific judgment in time; yet both are forward-looking and both belong to prophecy.

The very faith in the God of covenant who is actively engaged in judgment and redemption, and who can always be counted on to act "in character" reacting in similar situations in the same divine way, is predictive. The theology of

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the prophets is pregnant with what may be called "the future hope."

C. Specific prediction may be classified in a two-fold way.

They may be predictions of events which are quite near, even imminent. (judgment usually)

They may be predictions of events which are still in the remote, even indefinite, future. (hope usually)

Biblical eschatology cannot be divorced from the covenant nor the Biblical covenant from eschatology: the one illumines the other.

D. It is equally true that we cannot divorce predictive prophecy from historical contemporaneity.

No O.T. prophecy completely rids itself of the local "times-coloring".

But the "times-coloring" does not belong to the essence of a prophecy. It is rather the historical form in which the abiding truth of the prophecy is temporarily clothed.

IV. The Shortened Perspective

A. In the prophetic message the eschatological goal of the covenant is often seen as coming soon. It seems to be expected right after and in direct relation to the historical situation of the moment to which the message of the prophet is directed.

There is a sequence of purpose which may easily be confused with a calendar of times and seasons.

The prophet is concerned with the present unfaithfulness of God's people, which contradicts the purpose of the covenant and makes the experience of a genuine covenant relationship impossible; and as the messenger of God he pronounces judgment, often in concrete historical terms, upon the present evil situation.

The prophets were men of faith in the living God, who is the faithful God of covenant promise; because they believed that God is faithful they hoped for a glorious experiential fulfillment of the covenant, and they declared this hope as if it were on the horizon just beyond the present judgment.

V. The Fulfillment Greater Than the Prediction

A. It is wrong to assume that if we are to claim fulfillment of a prophecy there must be a literal correspondence between the prediction and the fulfillment. There is within each prophecy

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a central idea, and when this has been fulfilled, we may claim fulfillment for the prophecy as a whole.

- B. The chief concern of prophecy is not to prove that God can predict events with meticulous exactness before they happen; nor to construct a calendar of events which with divine precision charts the course of history beforehand, so as to make unnecessary the walk by faith and not by sight. A prophecy may be a sign: but if so, the thing signified will be what we have called its central religious idea.
- C. In saying that the fulfillment is greater than the prediction, we mean that it is clearer, that it is more specific in reference, that it has a more definite spiritual emphasis.

There is predictive prophecy in the O.T.; but we need the commentary of redemptive history, or of the New Testament gospel; *to declare all that was really essential in the prophecy.*

VI. The Double Emphasis in Prophecy

Our interpretation of prophecy must be guided by a clear recognition of the two chief points of emphasis in O.T. Prophecy: Judgment and Redemption.

- A. There is a goal indicated in the very covenant of blessing with Abraham (Gen. 12:3). Ever since the creation and the fall of man it has been God's active desire to bless all men "in Christ with every spiritual blessing." Gen. 12:3 and Eph. 1:3-14 are like the two ends of a string.

There is a goal indicated in the prophecy of Jeremiah concerning the new covenant which God will make (31:31-34). We see a consummation of the old in the new: a spiritually responsive people at last; the law of God finally written upon their hearts; a realization at last of the perfect fellowship between God and men envisioned by the covenant words "their God" and "my people"; a universal knowledge of God, in the deep inner and experiential sense which the prophets always had in mind when they spoke of "knowing the Lord;" a complete and permanent experience of the forgiveness of sin, that sin which had stood hindering in the way of true covenant fellowship with God.

There is a goal indicated in Isa. 40-66.

1. 40-48 Cyprus, or the redemption of the Jews from Babylon, as a prophetic shadow (or silhouette) of the redemption of humanity from bondage of sin.

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2. 49-57 Christ, or the redemption of humanity from sin through the servant of the Lord .
3. 58-66 The new world, or the redemption of the world as a result of the redemption from sin.

There is a goal indicated in Rev. 21:3-4. The fundamental covenant idea of the gracious presence of God with His people gives rise to the hope of victory over death and of eternal joy.

The goal that is set before us in both the O.T. and the N.T. is pictured in bright and variegated colors; but it is always the goal of hope for the fulfillment of God's covenant promises. In one form or another this is the closing note of almost every prophetic book in the O.T. (c.f. Obad. 21; Joel 3:21; Amos 9:15; Micah 7:20; Hab. 3:18; Zeph. 3:17; Hag. 3:19; Ezek. 48:35; Zech. 14:20-21.)

The composite picture given by such passages as these is that of the victory of God and His kingdom over every foe, of unbroken fellowship between a people holy to the Lord and their everpresent faithful God, of a new Covenant which does not supplant but fulfills the old. It is in a setting such as this that we must read the words of Jesus in Mt. 5:17 "Think not that I have come to abolish the law and the prophets; I have come not to abolish them but to fulfill them."

SUCH IS THE GOAL OF HISTORY THAT IS INDICATED BY PROPHECY.

How then does the God who according to prophecy acts in history move towards the fulfillment of this goal? He does so in two ways.

B. He does so in Judgment and in Redemption.

1. Judgment: Much of prophecy is devoted to preaching judgment. The law presents the commandments and claims of Jehovah to man; prophecy passes judgment on conduct in the light of God's revealed will and explains the object of God's dealings with men.

The conduct on which this judgment is passed is that of Israel as a covenant nation, the people of God.

Also upon the individual Israelite.

Also upon the people of God in the N.T. dispensation.

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Also upon the nations who in their conduct show themselves to be enemies of Israel and of Israel's God;

The reason for prophetic preaching of judgment is the presence of sin.

The sin of unfaithfulness to the covenant; for it is in this basic sin of faithlessness that the prophets see the root of every sin.

The primary purpose of the prophetic preaching of judgment was repentance; but often there was no repentance . . . but God is not mocked. When men do not repent at the preaching of the prophets, He acts. The very events of history are made to speak his will . . . judgment, captivity, catastrophe.

The divine purpose of the judgment is chastisement rather than destruction, and the divine goal is still a penitent people that will truly seek the Lord. It is only in persistent impenitence that the judgments of God become destruction upon His enemies . . . and even then the destruction becomes a testimony of the victory of God over all who oppose His holy will and His kingly power.

In judgment there is a prophetic reminder that God is not mocked . . . each judgment act becomes a peak in a mountain range that rises ever higher and higher, until it seems to point forward to a greater and a final judgment to come. Of that final judgment the O.T. seldom, IF EVER, speaks in direct terms; but it is foreshadowed by the judgments in time.

It is the prophetic phrase "the day of the Lord" that in a special way embodies this judgment motif, wherein judgment is seen as near, as repeated, as having a covenant-related purpose, as having also a final eschatological quality and effect.

2. Redemption: Parallel to and projecting beyond the motif of judgment is that of redemption. God moves forward towards the goal of His covenant with men by redemptive acts, or act, of deliverance.

VII. The Unifying Focal Point

All prophecy has one central focus . . . God's redemptive purpose and activity in history which heads up in Christ.

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- A. The incarnation is the dividing line between the Old and the New. In terms of Biblical interpretation it is the dividing-line between prophecy and fulfillment. We would include in the Incarnation also a life and ministry of Christ as well as the vital relationship of the Church to Christ as His body through which He still works in the world. If the Incarnation is a fact of history, then it follows inexorably that all O.T. teaching must be re-examined in its light and all interpretation of O.T. prophecy must be related to this new event which has the effect of making all things new.
- B. The Incarnation puts O.T. history very clearly and definitely into the place of the preliminary and temporary, whose real meaning and purpose cannot be fully seen apart from its fulfillment in Christ. From the biblical point of view there is nothing strange in speaking of a fulfillment of history. The covenant concept involves just this faith in a living God whose redemptive activity in history is an activity with a goal. The Incarnation is that goal. The coming of Christ ushered in the new age; it was the beginning of the "latter days;" it spelled Fulfillment with a capital "F".
- C. The Incarnation is specifically significant for an understanding of O.T. predictive prophecy. There are comparatively few direct predictions of the coming of a personal Messiah. The FUTURE HOPE that looks for the day of the "great Restoration," or for the day of covenant fulfillment, or for the day of the redemption of God's afflicted people, or for the day when men shall really know the Lord, or for the day when God's kingdom shall have come in all its universal scope and eternal glory—this is the FUTURE HOPE that is prominent . . . and because it is a future hope wrought by the Spirit of God, it is prophetic.
- D. There is the danger of misinterpretation of prophecy if we remove texts from their historical context and refer them to some historically unrelated situation in the remote future, perhaps in the time of the end. If Christ be indeed the *real goal* then His person, His life, His mission, His teaching, is like the funnel in the hourglass; in order to be valid and relevant in the new age every prophecy must funnel through the illuminating and transforming reality of the Incarnation and of Pentecost.

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This means that prophecy is significant only in relation to God's plan of salvation through Jesus Christ. The enmity of and the judgment upon the nations, for example, has no religious relevance apart from its relation to the kingdom of God. The nations upon whom the prophets pronounced judgment were nations who in their own day had shown hostility to Israel as the people of God. Israel as a political entity is not the significant thing in prophecy; the focus is on Israel as a religious community, which God has chosen to call "my people." As such Israel is representative of the people of God in the new age, even as her ancient enemies are representatives of the enemies of God and His kingdom in the new age .

SPECIAL STUDY FOUR

Note: The material printed below is a printed expose of the lack of scriptural evidence to support the premillennial theories. It is copied from articles in *THE VOICE OF EVANGELISM*, by Burton W. Barber, Spring of 1957. All scripture references are to be read and compared—**THIS IS VERY IMPORTANT!**

CHRIST IS NOW SITTING UPON DAVID'S THRONE

by Burton W. Barber

OLD TESTAMENT PROPHECIES PREDICTED IT

Jehovah's Witnesses, the Mormons, the premillennialists, and the Seventh Day bodies occupy a like position in reference to Christ's kingship; namely, that Christ came to earth to establish an earthly kingdom and to sit upon the literal throne upon which David sat. But, because the Jews as a whole rejected Him, Christ temporarily abandoned the idea and returned to heaven until the Jews would become kindly disposed toward Him, thus permitting Him to return to earth for a second try. In the meantime, as an emergency measure, the church, which, in