

Hermeneutics – Prophecy

“God sometimes uses symbols and vivid imagery to convey truths. In studying kingdom passages we will encounter dragons, horns, statues, and frightening beasts. This often happens in Ezekiel, Daniel, Zechariah and Revelation. The symbols in these books were given to be understood and point to literal meanings. Some are explained and others are not, and some are harder to decipher than others. Nevertheless, behind each symbol is a specific meaning. We should not approach most of the Bible in a contextual manner, but then shift to “symbolic interpretation” or some other approach when we address symbols or prophetic sections. A difference exists between how God reveals a particular revelation and how readers should interpret that revelation. The use of symbols does not sanction symbolic hermeneutics. A grammatical-historical-literary approach accounts for the meaning of symbols. We should apply sound interpretation principles to all Bible passages including those with symbols.”

— Michael J. Vlach, *He Will Reign Forever: A Biblical Theology of the Kingdom of God*, EPub, (Lampion Press, LLC, 2017), 34.

“To justify a spiritualizing approach on the basis of the book’s many symbols misses a significant distinction between the way God gave the revelation to John and the way readers should interpret that revelation.”

— Robert L. Thomas, *A Classical Dispensational View of Revelation*, in *Four Views on the Book of Revelation*, ed. C. Marvin Pate (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998), 181.

“The only dependable approach to prophecy, however, is the literal method of interpretation. This method assumes that Bible prophecy, written in regular human language, should be interpreted according to laws governing written communication. It is a trustworthy and God-honoring method of interpretation which takes the Bible at its word.”

— Paul Lee Tan, *The Interpretation of Prophecy*, (Rockville, Md., Assurance, 1984), 26.

“To sum up, it is true that prophecy is usually conveyed to the prophets in visions. But it is not true that objects seen and concepts perceived in visions are necessarily all (or nearly all) figurative representations. Prophecy does contain figures and symbols, but these are not the necessary upshots of ecstatic visions. Figurative representations are God-given signs and concepts which depict future events and details.”

— Paul Lee Tan, *The Interpretation of Prophecy*, (Rockville, Md., Assurance, 1984), 91.

The arguments for literalism as it relates to prophecy is quite simple.

1. Prophecy is intended to be understood
2. Language originated with God
3. Historical Fulfillment
4. Messianic Prophecies
5. Practical Necessity

“Though the prophets often express themselves symbolically, it is erroneous to regard their language as symbolical throughout.”

— Louis Berkhof, *Principles of Biblical Interpretation* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Book House, 1966), 150.

“The figurative character of the description, in its general features, not less than in the particular images it employs, should be preserved throughout since we cannot suppose that the vision shifted from a symbolical or ideal description in one part to - plain matter-of-fact description in another.”

— Fairbairn, *Interpretation of Prophecy*, 147-148.

(1). Fundamentals in the interpretation of any passage of prophetic Scripture.

(i) We must, to begin with, give careful attention to the language of the prophetic passage. We must determine the meaning and significance of all proper names, events, references to geography, references to customs, references to material culture, references to flora and fauna, and references to climate.

(ii). We must determine the historical background of the prophet and the prophecy. This establishes the universe of discourse in which the prophet writes.

(iii). Although it is a principle of general hermeneutics it needs to be reemphasized here that diligent attention must be paid to the context and flow of the discussion in the interpretation of prophecy. Chapter and verse divisions are man-made and frequently arbitrary and misleading. The interpreter will look beyond these divisions and discover the natural divisions and connections of the Scripture.

(iv). The interpreter must be mindful of the nonsystematic character of prophetic writings. The prophets were preachers and visionaries and not academic lecturers.

(v). Every interpreter of prophetic Scripture should search the entire body of prophetic Scripture to find what passages parallel each other.

(2). The interpreter must determine the distinct essence of the passage of prophetic Scripture.

(i). The interpreter must determine whether the passage is predictive or didactic.

(ii). The interpreter must determine whether the passage is conditional or unconditional.

(iii). If the passage is prophetic determine further if it is fulfilled or unfulfilled.

(3) the problem of fulfilment in prophecy.

(i) then a study of the text with the historical materials which contains the fulfilment must be made.

(ii). If the prophecy is unfulfilled we must take the lesson gleaned from the previous point—proceed with caution.

(iii). There is the possibility of multiple fulfilment. There is a difference between “multiple sense” and “multiple fulfilment.”

(3). The interpreter should take the literal meaning of a prophetic passage as his limiting or controlling guide.

— Bernard Ramm, Protestant Biblical Interpretation, 3rd rev. ed. e-book, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1970), 191-194.