

Session #2 — Hermeneutics: How to Rightly Interpret Prophecy — God Gives Clarity [Not Ambiguity] In the Text!"

Using correct interpretive principles is critical for understanding biblical prophecy.

1. consistent use of grammatical historical interoperation in ALL areas of the bible.
2. original meaning of the bible writers and what the original readers would have understood
3. the bible texts have a single meaning — not multiple, hidden or allegorical meanings.

Spiritual approach to prophecy has often led to (erroneous) beliefs the the church is the *new or spiritual* Israel or that the land promises in the Old Testament are primarily/exclusively spiritual blessings for the Church

(Richard Mayhue & Michael Vlach).

We must understand the “GENRE” = a french term that means “kind” — a kind/species/distinctive type of literature. This realizes the fact that the Bible contains different *types/kinds* of literature — prophecy, epistle, poetry, narrative, etc. Today we focus on “**Prophecy**” — the word prophecy simply means “to speak before” or “to speak forth.”

Background regarding “PROPHECY”

- Prophecy comforts
- Prophecy purifies
- Prophecy instructs
- Prophecy emboldens
- Prophecy clarifies
- Prophecy encourages

Two types of prophecy**• 1. FORETELLING —**

- Predicting the future Some biblical prophecy involves the actual prediction of future events (Gen 49 - Jacob’s prophecy of his sons; Isa 53 (messiah); Amos 9 (Israel’s restoration), Matt 24 (2nd coming of Christ)

• 2. FORTHTELLING —

- Relating the Word of God to people. The primary responsibility of the prophets was to forthtell not foretell. They spoke God’s message and warnings. For example: “Thus says the LORD” (1900x in the Scriptures).

• Much of your Bible is prophetic —

- *in the OLD TESTAMENT*
 - major prophet (Isa, Jer, Ezek, Dan)
 - minor prophets (the “12”) [smaller/briefer]
 - some Psalms and portions of the Historical writings (cf. Ps 110 & Ps 72 & Ps 2; Gen 49)
- *in the NEW TESTAMENT*
 - Matthew 24-25 // Mark 13
 - Revelation

• **Examples of prophecies *already literally fulfilled*. (past literal fulfillment described)**

1. Isaiah prophesied “Cyrus” by name as the King who would allow Israel to return to her homeland after exile (Isa 44:28-45:1; Ezra 1.1)
2. Jeremiah’s prophecy of the seventy-year captivity (Jer. 25:11).
3. Daniel’s prophecy that Belshazzar’s kingdom would be taken over by the Medes and the Persians (Dan. 5:25-30).
4. Jesus’ prediction that He would be killed and rise again (Matt.16:21); Jesus’ prophecy of Jerusalem’s devastation by Rome (Luke 19:41-44)

• **Examples of prophecies awaiting a future fulfillment. (future literal fulfillment expected)**

1. The prediction of the angels that Jesus would return in the same way as He departed (Acts 1:11).
2. The day of the Lord and the coming of the man of lawlessness (2 Thessalonians 2)
3. The rapture of the saints (1 Thess. 4:13–18)
4. The restoration of Israel (Ezek. 36–37)
5. The binding of Satan and the 1,000 year earthly reign of Christ (Rev. 20)
6. The destruction of the earth by fire (2 Peter 3)
7. The new heavens and new earth (Rev. 21–22)

→ **Significantly: If prophecies about the *FIRST* coming of Jesus were fulfilled literally and then there are prophecies about the *SECOND* coming in the same context — it is only to be assumed that they will likewise be fulfilled in a LITERAL way.**

>>> What’s the key? Hermeneutical consistency.

HOW TO INTERPRET PROPHECY: some interpretive reminders (hermeneutical helps):

1. **Consistency** in hermeneutic in ‘genre’ — normal grammatical sense — consistent use of grammatical historical interpretation in *ALL* areas of the bible — seeking to understand the original meaning of the bible writers and what the original readers would have understood. >> the bible texts have a single meaning — not multiple, hidden or allegorical meanings
 1. We take consistent, literal hermeneutic seriously.
 2. **Please understand:** If Amillennialists used their spiritualizing method of interpretation for non-prophetic (non-eschatological passages), it would be utterly destructive to Christian Doctrine. What if they spiritualized/allegorized substitutionary atonement, justification, adoption, imputed righteousness, heaven, hell?
2. Unconditional **covenants** are still in tact (they cannot be abrogated, superseded, or replaced or annulled).
 1. Unfulfilled unconditional covenants God made with Israel must be fulfilled “Since the promises to Israel— about being a nation and being regathered to and having possession of the land with their Messiah-King ruling over them—are unconditional and have not yet been fulfilled, they therefore yet remain to be fulfilled” (Roy Zuck).
 2. **Abrahamic** Covenant (Gen. 12:1-3) “Described in Genesis 12:1-3, the Abrahamic covenant promised a land (v.1; cf. 13:14-17; further developed in the Palestinian covenant); numerous descendants involving a nation,

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- dynasty, and a throne (v. 2; cf. 13:16; 17:2-6; further developed in the **Davidic** Covenant); and redemption (v. 3; cf. 22:18; further developed in the **New** covenant)” (Peter Enns).
3. If these covenants are understood according to their normal meaning, then they call for a future blessing of believing, national Israel in the land under Messiah’s rule. These covenants await a fulfillment in the Millennium.
 3. **Fulfilled** in the past or awaiting fulfillment -- this is important to ascertain given the context and other Scriptures in the Bible that may shed light on whether this prophecy has already been fulfilled or if it still awaits fulfillment.
 4. **Explanation** in the text (Rev 17/18; Dan 2) — sometimes the text itself will explain what the language/ prophecies refer to [E.g., Revelation 17-18 — the harlot is “Babylon the city” and Daniel 2 explains the “kingdoms”]
 5. Recognize the place of **figurative** and symbolic language (figures of speech is frequent in prophetic genre)
 1. To be sure, John uses “*like*” or “*as*” as an attempt to describe futuristic events that are beyond his own linguistic ability. He communicates through language of correspondence, he uses similes or language of comparison by equating these from his own world to the futuristic events that he sees in his vision.
 6. Interpret **numbers** literally — straightforward, normally, plainly (*not* allegorically & *not* spiritualizing them)
 1. “What about numbers in prophetic literature? One writer suggests ‘in a book where almost all the numbers seem to have symbolic value (7 seals, trumpets, bowls, etc.; 144,000 Israelites; 42 months/1260 days/ 3 _ years) should not 1,000 years indicate a long period of time rather than a number of calendar years?’ But are all the numbers he mentions to be taken as symbols? Do they not have meaning as ordinary, literal numbers? If 7, 42, 1,260 are not to be taken literally, then what about the reference to the 2 witnesses in 11:3? And if 1,000 means simply a large number, then what the reference to 7,000 people in verse 13? On what basis do we say that 7,000 does not mean a literal 7,000? And if 1,000 is a large indefinite number, do the references to 4 angels (7:1) and 7 angels (8:6) mean simply small numbers? If these numbers in the Book of Revelation have no normal, literal numerical value, then what has happened to the principle of normal, grammatical interpretation? How can we say that 144,000 is a symbolic number, when 7:5-8 refers specifically to 12,000 from each of 12 tribes in Israel?” (Roy Zuck). **Thus, interpret numbers literally.** Why? If the number doesn’t mean what it says, then how can there be any objective clarity about what it *does* mean?
 2. Revelation 20 talks about a time of 1,000 years when Jesus will reign with his saints on earth. If is not literal, it opens the door for other non literal conjectures and lots of suspicions and ideas but no certainty and clarity.
 1. the 2 witnesses (Rev 11.3)
 2. 7,000 people (Rev 11.13)
 3. 4 angels (Rev 7.1)
 4. 7 Angels (Rev 8.6)
 5. 144,000 Jews (Rev 7.4); 7 churches (Rev 2-3); Israel protected for 1,260 days (Rev 12.6). *If it doesn’t mean what it says, then *What Does it **MEAN**?*
 6. Mark this: Robert Thomas accurately says: “NO number in Revelation is verifiably a symbolic number” >> we have NO clear, concrete evidence whatsoever to take **any** number as figurative / non-literal.
 7. Near & far **fulfillments** (Isa 61; Isa 9) — Recognize the principle of “**Foreshortening**” (we saw foretelling and Forthtelling; but here we have FORESHORTENING). “Looking ahead, the prophets often envisioned the two advents of Christ as two mountain peaks, with a valley in between. They could see the peaks but not the valleys. From our perspective, however, as we look back we see the time gap between the First and Second Advents. Often the Old Testament blends the two comings of Christ in one passage” (Roy Zuck).
 1. What is prophetic foreshortening. Foreshorten doesn’t even sound like a real word, but it is. It means to portray something as closer than it is or as having less depth or distance than it really does. A paragraph may

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mention two comings of Christ but not indicate a time-gap in between them. They saw them like mountain ranges — seeing the mountain peaks but not knowing the distance that really exists between them. The later texts often can clarify this.

8. Prophecy most often focuses upon the **Messiah**, his comings, and His glorious earthly reign and his eternal, glorious Kingdom! (Jer 31-33; Ezek 36-39; Joel 3; Amos 9; Zechariah 9-14; Matt 24-25; Revelation!)

THESIS — I want to look at Scriptures & **show you how to plainly interpret prophetic texts in context.**

Some Examples:

Literal fulfillment of 1st coming, a consistent hermeneutic demands a literal fulfillment at 2nd coming & surrounding events.

1. Micah 5:2 - birth of Christ
2. Isaiah 9:6-7 - birth of Christ
3. Isaiah 61:1-2 - ministry of Christ
4. Psalm 22 - sufferings of Christ (vv.1-21 - suffering of Messiah/1st coming)
5. Zechariah 9:9-10 — triumphal entry (quoted in Matthew 21:5; Zechariah 9:9 was fulfilled when Christ entered Jerusalem on Palm Sunday)

➔ A few more examples of literal, historical fulfillment & then future prophecies in **same context** that demands a consistent interpretation demanding a literal fulfillment!

1. Ezekiel 20 — rehearsing God’s dealings with Israel = God’s absolute sovereignty = theme: “For the sake of my name”
 1. Egypt (1-8)
 2. Wilderness (8-26)
 3. Canaan/Conquest (27-32) - *literally fulfilled*
 4. FUTURE RESTORATION (33-49) - *future, literal expectation*
 1. Regathering to Israel (33-36)
 2. Going thru Trouble (37-38)
 3. Serve God in the Land (39-44)

2. Daniel 2 - The KING's dream & its interpretation
 1. Daniel Interprets it TO the King (31ff) — the “statue”
 1. Kingdom #1 — Babylon (36-38)
 2. Kingdom #2 — Media Persia (39) (on the earth, v.39b)
 3. Kingdom #3 — Greece (v.39) (on the earth, v.39b)
 4. Kingdom #4 — Rome (40-43)
 1. these are EARTHLY, LITERAL, POWERFUL
 2. literal, with a king, land, laws, culture, geographical dimensions — on the *earth*
 5. Future Messianic Kingdom #5 (vv.44-45) - it *must* be literal because in the dream this “stone that struck the statute became a great mountain & FILLED the whole earth (v.35b)

3. Zechariah 14 — 2nd coming of Messiah to the Mt of Olives (cf. Matt 24; Rev 19; 2 Thess 1)
 1. v.2 - all nations for battle (Armageddon)
 2. v.3 - the LORD will fight
 3. v.4 - the 2nd coming = Standing on Mt of Olives (Rev 19:11-21)
 4. v.5b = the Lord will come & holy ones with him (cf Jude 14)
 5. v.9 - the LORD will be king over the earth (cf. Rev 20:1-6)
 6. v.10-11 - geological changes & people will dwell securely
 7. v.16 - the nations coming to worship the KING, the Lord of Hosts

4. Revelation 19 - 2nd coming of Christ (vv.11-21);
 1. Then Rev 20:1-10 - 1,000 year kingdom (2 physical resurrections)
 2. Then Rev 20:11-15 - great white throne
 3. Then Rev 21-22 - eternal state//new heavens/earth

Interesting observation:

Abandoning the grammatical historical interpretation also leads to discarding what the Bible says about a large swath of Scriptures (both Old & New Testaments) about the coming, earth kingdom of Messiah.

Even those who deny a future earthly kingdom of Jesus admit that a literal approach and consistent approach to the hermeneutic MUST lead to a coming, literal, earthly kingdom. For example:

OT Allis [Amillennialist] says: “The Old Testament prophecies if literally interpreted cannot be regarded as having been fulfilled or as being capable of fulfillment in this age.”

Floyd Hamilton [Amillennialist] says: “Now we must frankly admit that a literal interpretation of the Old Testament prophecies gives us just such a picture of an earthly reign of the Messiah as the premillennialist pictures.”

CONCLUSION:

Normative, literal, or plain sense hermeneutics is to be applied **equally** and ***consistently*** across all genres. We affirm the single sense (meaning) of Scripture.

Grammatical Historical interpretation - “its fundamental principle is to gather from the Scriptures themselves the **PRECISE MEANING** which the writers intended to convey. It applies to the sacred books the same principles, the same grammatical process and exercise of common sense and reason, which we apply to other books. The grammatico-historical exegete, will inquire into the circumstances under which the original author wrote, the manners and customs of his age, and the purpose or object which he had in view. He has a right to assume that no sensible author will be knowingly inconsistent with himself, or seek to bewilder or mislead readers” (MILTON TERRY).

BIG POINT = MEANING IS FASTENED TO THE TEXT TO THE PLAIN SENSE OF THE WORDING.

Rev. 1:3 Blessed is he who reads and those who hear the words of the prophecy, and heed the things which are written in it; for the time is near.

Rev. 22:10 And he said to me, “Do not seal up [=hide, close up] the words of the prophecy of this book, for the time is near.

Simple Summary:

Interpreting Prophecy Rightly when it comes to the New Testament & especially the Book of Revelation: some hermeneutical keys that must be remembered for accurate understanding:

1. Remember the Genre - it is prophecy, prophetic literature (from God regarding the future); it is *not* apocalyptic.
2. Remember the Old Testament - interpret Scripture with Scripture [remember: John draws on the Old Testament extensively]
3. Remember authorial intent — what did the *A/author* mean by what he wrote [cannot spiritualize/allegorize it]
4. Remember progressive relation - start with the Old Testament & build on this foundation when coming to Revelation & New Testament. Cannot take Revelation & re-interpret Old Testament thru NT lens.
5. Remember straightforward, plain, normal interpretation - interpret it *normally*. When the plain sense makes sense, seek no other sense.
6. Remember figures of speech & symbols - note the key words: “Like/As”