

STUDYING PROPHECY

Presuppositions, Methods and Approaches for Interpreting Prophetic Texts

Anyone who has studied prophecy knows that there is much disagreement among students of the Bible concerning the interpretation of prophecy. In this study we will survey some of the terms, presuppositions, methods, and approaches different camps use when studying prophecy and then present the method we use at Calvary Bible Church.

I. IMPORTANT TERMS TO KNOW

Whenever discussing any technical issue, such as prophecy, you have to understand the terms used in that field of study. If you don't understand the terminology it is very difficult to communicate clearly and effectively. Below is a list of some of the more common terms related to prophecy.

- A. **Allegory:** An allegory is an extended metaphor or figurative portion of literature where the literal words have secondary meaning. The allegorical vision of the tree in **Dan 4:11-27**, and the allegorical usage of Sarah and Hagar in **Gal. 4:21-5:1**, or the beast in **Rev. 13:1-8; 17:7-18**, are examples of allegory.
- B. **The "antichrist," "man of sin," "man of lawlessness" or "the beast":** refers to a world ruler who makes a peace treaty with Israel for seven years but in the middle of that seven years breaks the treaty and commits the abomination of desolation desecrating the temple. He persecutes the believers, is empowered by Satan, and claims to be God (**Dan. 7:24-25; II Thess. 2:1-4; I Jn. 2:18, 22; 4:2-3; Rev. 11:7; 13:1-18; 14:9, 11; 15:2; 16:2, 10, 13; 17:3-17; 19:19-20; 20:4; 10**).
- C. **Apocalypse:** From the Greek word *apokalupsis*, *apo* = "from" and *kalupsis* = "to uncover or unveil." It is used to describe the revealing of Christ at His second coming (**I Pet. 1:7; Rev. 1:1**).
- D. **Apocalyptic:** This is a term often used to describe portions of the Bible or issues that relate to the end times or the second coming of Christ. Prophetic texts are usually labeled "apocalyptic" if they employ large amounts of symbolic, metaphorical, and/or allegorical type language. Yet, there is no consensus on the meaning of this word among students of the Bible.
- E. **Continuity and Discontinuity:** This phrase is used in reference to the ongoing debate concerning how much continuity and/or discontinuity there is between the Old and New Testaments. Issues such as: Is there a future for Israel? Has the church replaced Israel? Did the church exist in the Old Testament? Is the Old Testament to be interpreted by the New Testament or is the New Testament to be understood in light of the Old Testament? Questions like these relate to how much continuity and discontinuity exists between the Old and New Testaments. Generally speaking those in the dispensational camp believe there is more discontinuity. Those in the covenant reformed camp believe there is more continuity.

- F. **Day of the Lord:** This is a very complicated subject. In some respects there have been certain prototypical (preview) "day of the Lords" which have been fulfilled in Israel's history. But the Scriptures speak of an ultimate and specific "Day of the Lord" which is still future. The Day of the Lord is an eruption of God into the world of men to judge the wicked and save the righteous (**Ezek. 30:3; Joel 1:15; 2:1, 11, 31; 3:14; I Cor. 5:5; I Thess. 5:2; II Pet. 3:10**).
- G. **Dispensationalism:** A term used to describe those who believe it is best to organize and understand the Bible according to various dispensations or time periods. Dispensationalists take a more literal approach to interpreting prophecy. They believe the prophetic texts of the Old Testament are to be interpreted within their own contexts and not reinterpreted by New Testament prophecies. Dispensationalism believes that the ethnic nation Israel has a specific place in God's future plan of salvation which is distinct from the church, that there will be a literal one thousand year reign of Christ on the earth.
- H. **Eschatology:** A term used to describe "the doctrine or study of last things."
- I. **Eternal State:** This is the last phase of God's program for mankind after He judges the living and the dead, judges Satan and his angels, and recreates the heaven and the earth. Believers will live with Christ in the "eternal state" forever (**Rev. 21:10-22:5**).
- J. **Figurative and Symbolic language:** When words are said to be figurative or symbolic it means that the literal meaning of the word is not the primary meaning. There are over two hundred types of figurative language in the Bible. Both figurative and symbolic usage of words use the literal meaning of words to communicate a secondary meaning. For instance the word "sun" in **Mark 1:32** is used literally, "*And when evening had come, after **the sun had set...***" In **Rev. 7:16** the word sun is used figuratively, "*They shall hunger no more, neither thirst anymore; neither shall the **sun beat down** on them, nor any heat.*" In **Rev. 12:1** sun is again used but this time symbolically, "*A great and wondrous sign appeared in heaven: a woman **clothed with the sun.** . . .*"
- K. **Hermeneutics:** Hermeneutics is the science and art of Biblical interpretation. Hermeneutics is the field of study which attempts to define the most accurate methods and techniques for studying the Scriptures. Different hermeneutical systems determine how prophecy is to be interpreted.
- L. **Imminence of Christ's Return:** This is the doctrine which says that Christ can come back at any moment to save the righteous and judge the wicked. Paul and Peter, for instance, described "the Day" as coming "like a thief" (**I Cor. 1:7; Tit. 2:13; II Pet. 3:12-14**).
- M. **The Last Days or Times:** Refers in general to the time period from the birth of the church at Pentecost (**Acts 2**) to the Great White Throne judgement after the thousand year reign of Christ. In a more specific way it is used to describe the

days immediately preceding the second coming of Christ (**II Tim. 3:1; Heb. 1:1-2; James 5:3; I Pet. 1:5, 20**).

- N. **Metaphor:** A metaphor is an unexpressed comparison. A metaphor does not use the words "like" or "as" like a simile does. Jesus used metaphor when He said, "*I am the door,*" "*I am the bread of life,*" "*You are the light of the world.*" Metaphor is to use the literal meaning of words to communicate a secondary, comparative, or non-literal meaning.
- O. **Millennium -** The term "millennium" *chilioi* means 1000 years and the term "millennial" means having to do with the 1000 year reign of Christ. **Rev. 20:1-7** mentions the thousand year reign of Christ six times. Three times it is used with the definite article "the" as in "the thousand year" emphasizing it is a specific thousand years and three times it is used without the article "a thousand years" which emphasizes its nature or duration.
- P. **Multiple Fulfillment or Sense Texts:** Multiple fulfillment passages are those which have both a near fulfillment, sense or meaning, and a more distant or complete fulfillment, sense or meaning. These passages are often hotly debated. It is difficult to try and determine what the "single interpretation" of a passage is if it has more than one fulfillment. For instance in II Sam. 7:13-14 there is a prophecy about David's son, "*He shall build a house for My name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever. I will be a father to him and he will be a son to Me; when he commits iniquity, I will correct him with the rod of men and the strokes of the sons of men.*" Solomon served as a near fulfillment of this prophecy as he was 1) A literal son of David, 2) Built God a house or temple, 3) Committed iniquity, 4) Was corrected with the rod of men (figuratively speaking). The prophecy also has a far fulfillment in Jesus Christ who was 1) A descendant of David (often referred to as the son of David), 2) Will build a house for God, 2) Has a throne and a kingdom which will be established forever, 3) Was literally the Son of God and God was His father. So in this one prophecy, there is a dual fulfillment or dual sense to its meaning.
- Q. **Rapture:** The term used to describe the resurrection, translation and glorification of believers both dead and alive when they are caught up "raptured" to be with the Lord. The timing of the rapture in relation to future is debated. The word "rapture" does not appear in the Bible. The term "*caught up*" (**I Thess. 4:17**) is from a Greek word *harpodzo* the word we get the English word "harpoon" and it's basic meaning is, "*to seize, to snatch up, or to grasp.*" A good illustration of someone being caught up before God's wrath is Enoch (**cf. Gen. 5:24; Heb. 11:5**), who "*walked with God and was not for the Lord took him.*" In like manner Christians will be "taken up" i.e., raptured, taken up to be with the Lord like Enoch (**I Cor. 15:51-52; I Thess. 4:13-18**).
- R. **Simile:** A simile is an expressed comparison and uses the words "like" and "as" to indicate a comparison is being made. **Rev. 1:13-16** "*and in the middle of the lampstands one like a son of man, clothed in a robe reaching to the feet, and girded across His breast with a golden girdle. And His head and His hair were*

white like white wool, like snow; and His eyes were like a flame of fire; and His feet were like burnished bronze, when it has been caused to glow in a furnace, and His voice was like the sound of many waters. And in His right hand He held seven stars; and out of His mouth came a sharp two-edged sword; and His face was like the sun shining in its strength."

- S. **Tribulation** is a term used to describe a seven year period of time immediately preceding the second coming of Jesus Christ. It is a time of unprecedented global wrath from God. It is compared to the flood and the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah (Luke 17:26-32). There will be world wide supernatural judgement of an unmatched magnitude. The tribulation referred to as "Daniel's seventieth week" and is often referenced in three and a half year segments e.g., forty-two months, 1,260 days, times, time, and a half of time. The second half of the tribulation is often referred to as the Great Tribulation (**Dan. 9:24-27; 12:1; Mt. 24:15-21; Rev. 6:16-17; 12:4-6**).
- T. **Types:** A type is an Old Testament person, place, or thing that has literal historical meaning but which is a model, prototype, or pattern of a greater future reality. Usually (if not always) they pre-figure Christ. Melchizedek (**Gen. 14:18**) was a type of Christ (**Heb. 7**), the bronze serpent (**Numb. 21:9**) was a pre-figuring of Christ's death on the cross (**John 3:14**), and much of the Old Testament sacrificial system represented Christ and His work (**Heb. 9:8**).

II. WHY THERE ARE RADICALLY DIFFERENT VIEWS OF PROPHECY

- A. **Tradition:** Some people are more interested in maintaining their denomination's view or creed or tradition rather than teaching what they discover from the study of the Scriptures. Their primary concern is to uphold their theological heritage, even if it means ignoring and/or taking difficult interpretations of the Bible.
- B. **Theological Systems:** Some people are locked into a theological system which becomes a grid by which they strain Scripture. As with those trying to conform to tradition, these believe it is most important to hold to a certain theological system. In the final analysis, their theological system carries more weight than the Scriptures. When they study prophecy they are looking to interpret it so that it fits in with what they already believe.
- C. **Differing Hermeneutics (Bible study principles):** Most conservative students of the Bible would say they use the historical grammatical approach to interpretation but some would say they use the "literal" historical grammatical approach. **The literal, historical, grammatical, approach to interpretation: by literal** it means according to the plain meaning of the words, but not ignoring literary devices such as metaphors, idioms, parables, figures of speech, etc. **By historical** it means according to the historical context of the passage being studied. **By grammatical** it means according to the meaning of the words (grammar) and the syntax (the sentence structure of a passage). This approach seeks to take the Scriptures literally unless there is some reason in the context

not to take it literally. A non-literal or allegorical approach to interpreting prophecy leads to subjective and divergent interpretation. A more literal approach leads to more consistent interpretations.

D. Differing Presuppositions: It is common for those in the dispensational camp to accuse those in the covenantal camp of over allegorizing or spiritualizing the text. It is common for those in the covenantal camp to accuse dispensationalists of taking hyper literal interpretations. But it is not all that simple. Both dispensationalists and covenantalists see both literal and figurative language being used in prophecy. It is true that dispensationalists interpret prophecy more literally and covenantalists interpret it more figuratively but the question to ask is “why?” This brings us to the issues of continuity and discontinuity as mentioned above and depending on where you stand there, will affect your hermeneutics, and that in turn will affect how you interpret prophecy. At the risk of being overly simplistic, but to avoid a long detailed discussion, the reason covenantalists spiritualize more than dispensationalists goes back to how they view the Old and New Testaments. Generally speaking:

Dispensationalists	Covenantalists
Every Old Testament text is to be interpreted in its own context	Every Old Testament text is to be reinterpreted by the New Testament
The interpretation to strive for is what the Old Testament authors meant their Old Testament audience to understand by what was written	The interpretation to strive for is to understand each Old Testament text as it has been transformed by the coming of Christ
The meaning of the Old Testament does not change	The meaning of the Old Testament changes with the coming of Christ
We are to interpret Old Testament prophecies related to Israel as if they will be literally fulfilled by Israel	We are to interpret Old Testament prophecies related to Israel as if they will be spiritually fulfilled in the church
Israel and the church are distinct entities which have distinct prophetic futures. The church does enjoy the promises to Abraham in Christ but this does not nullify the promises made to Israel. “The Israel of God” in Gal. 6:16 is a reference to believing Jews.	Israel and the church are identical entities and do not have distinct prophetic futures. There is no distinct prophetic future for the ethnic nation of Israel except for believing Jews within the church, for the church is “the Israel of God.”
All the past predicted judgments upon Israel were fulfilled literally to Israel and all the promised future blessings for Israel will be fulfilled literally to Israel.	All the past predicted judgments to Israel were fulfilled literally to Israel and all the promised future blessings to Israel will be fulfilled spiritually to the church.

As you can see from the chart above, there are some major differences in how both camps understand the relationship between the Old and New Testaments. This is why both camps differ in their hermeneutics and interpretation of prophecy. Calvary Bible Church takes a dispensational approach to interpreting prophecy for we believe that the interpretation of the Old Testament remains constant and has not been transformed by the Christ event. This makes it easy for us as we interpret both testaments and prophecy the same.

III. OUR GENERAL APPROACH TO INTERPRETING Prophecy

- A. **Take a literal interpretation of your passage unless there is a specific reason not to do so from the context or other texts which shed light on the text you are studying.** As the saying goes, "If the literal meaning makes sense, seek no other sense."
- B. **Remember that some prophets were unable to explain in words what they saw in visions and used literal words to describe things never seen before.** They did their best to relay what they saw but often do not explain details in words which meet our curiosities.
- C. **As you seek to understand the details of any given text keep in mind the big picture or main idea of the entire section.** We often want to know the sequence and timing of prophetic events but it is often the author's desire to encourage us to holy living and instill hope in us for the future.
- D. **Beware of interpreting prophecy by the newspaper, magazines, fiction books, and current events.** Prophecy is exciting and it is tempting to try and fit current events into the Bible. There is a danger in becoming dogmatic about things that the Bible isn't dogmatic about and to teach as fact what we think might be true. We should compare prophecy to our world situation, but not make hasty conclusions or conspiracies.
- E. **Remember it is important to study prophecy.** Some people neglect to study prophecy for a variety of reasons, but the Bible says we are to teach the whole counsel of God's Word (Acts 20:26-27); that all Scripture is inspired by God and profitable (II Tim. 3:15-17); and Revelation is the only book in the Bible which promises a blessing at the beginning and the end for those who read it (Rev. 1:3; 22:7).
- F. **Don't try to force your theological system on prophetic passages.** Let them speak for themselves first, then see how they fit into your prophetic beliefs. If there is a conflict, either change your system to conform to the text of Scripture or study to see if your interpretation is wrong, but do not ignore texts that disagree with what you believe.
- G. **Do exegesis (read out of) not eisegesis (read into) when you study prophetic texts.** Many have come up with bizarre fanciful interpretations by reading things into the text which the author could not have had in mind.