

III. RULES FOR THE INTERPRETATION OF PROPHECY

The last section has dealt with the problems relative to the interpretation of prophecies that arise because of the nature of the language involved. Attention is now directed to a discussion of the general principles involved in the interpretation of the prophecies when once that which is prophesied is clearly understood.

The interpretation of prophecy requires attention to the same considerations in regard to words, context, grammar, and historical situations that are the accepted principles in respect to any field of interpretation. Terry states this thus:

. . .it will be seen that, while duly appreciating the peculiarities of prophecy, we nevertheless must employ in its interpretation essentially the same great principles as in the Interpretation of other ancient writings. First, we should ascertain the historical position of the prophet; next the scope and plan of his book; then the usage and import of his words and symbols; and, finally, ample and discriminating comparison of the parallel Scriptures should be made.²⁹

There is no lack of lists of rules to guide us in the interpretation of prophecy.³⁰ Perhaps those suggested by Ramm are the most helpful:

(1) Determine the historical background of the prophet and the prophecy. (2) Determine the full meaning and significance of all proper names, events, geographical references, references to customs or material culture, and references to flora and fauna. (3) Determine if the passage is predictive or didactic. (4) If predictive determine if fulfilled, unfulfilled, or conditional. (5) Determine if the same theme or concept is also treated elsewhere. (6) As a reminder, keep vividly in mind the flow of the passage, i.e., pay attention to context. (7) Notice that element of the prophecy that is purely local or temporal. (8) Take the literal interpretation of prophecy as the limiting guide in prophetic interpretation.³¹

A. Interpret literally.

Perhaps the primary consideration in relation to the interpretation of prophecy is that, like all other areas of Biblical interpretation, it must be interpreted literally. Regardless of the form through which the prophetic revelation is made, through that form some literal truth is revealed. It is the problem of the interpreter to discover that truth. Davidson affirms:

This I consider the first principle in prophetic interpretation--to read the prophet literally--to assume that the literal meaning is *his* meaning--that he is moving among realities, not symbols, among concrete things like peoples, not among abstractions like our Church, world, etc.³²

The reason a non-literal method of interpretation is adopted is, almost without exception, because of a desire to avoid the obvious interpretation of the passage. The desire to bring the teaching of Scripture into harmony with some predetermined

system of doctrine instead of bringing doctrine into harmony with the Scriptures has kept the method alive.³³

Without doubt the greatest confirmation of the literal method of interpreting prophecies comes from an observation of the method God has employed to fulfill the prophecies that have already been fulfilled, Masselink says:

We can therefore derive our method of interpretation for the unfulfilled prophecy from the fulfilled, because we may safely deduce the guiding principles for the unfulfilled prophecy from the fulfilled predictions which are recorded in the New Testament.³⁴

From our vantage point in time prophecy is divided into that which has been fulfilled and that which is unfulfilled. From God's viewpoint prophecy is a unit, indivisible on the time basis. Since it is a unit, and therefore indivisible, that method used in those prophecies that are now fulfilled will also be the method used to fulfill those prophecies that await future fulfillment. In the field of fulfilled prophecy it is not possible to point to any prophecy that has been fulfilled in any way other than literally. The New Testament knows of no other method of fulfilling the Old. God has thus established His divine principle. Feinberg says:

. . . in the interpretation of prophecy that has not yet been fulfilled, those prophecies which have been fulfilled are to form the pattern. The only way to know how God will fulfill prophecy in the future is to ascertain how He has done it in the past. All the prophecies of the suffering Messiah were literally fulfilled in the first advent of Christ. We have no reason to believe that the predictions of a glorified and reigning Messiah will be brought to pass in any other manner.³⁵

The conclusion must be that the New Testament literal method of fulfillment establishes the literal method as God's method in regard to unfulfilled prophecy.

B. Interpret according to the harmony of prophecy.

The second rule is laid down in 2 Peter 1:20-21, where the author affirms that no prophecy is of "private interpretation." Prophecy must be interpreted in harmony with the whole prophetic program. Feinberg says:

There are several well-defined laws for the interpretation of prophecy. The Scripture itself lays down the first and most essential of all. Peter tells us in his second letter that "no prophecy of the scripture is of any private interpretation." By this it is not meant that no private individual can interpret prophecy. The idea intended by the apostle is that no prophecy of the Word is to be interpreted solely with reference to but all other portions of the prophetic revelation are to be taken into account and considered. Every prophecy is part of a wonderful scheme of revelation; for the true significance of any prophecy the whole prophetic scheme must be kept in mind and the interrelationship between the parts in the plan as well.³⁶

This will call for a careful study, not only of the general themes of prophecy, but also of all passages related to any given theme so a harmonized view be gained, for one prediction will often throw light upon another.

C. Observe the perspective of prophecy.

Events which bear some relationship to one another and are parts of one program, or an event typical of another so that there is a double reference, may be brought together into one prophecy even though separated widely in fulfillment. Feinberg states:

. . .in the interpretation of prophecy . . . due attention must be paid to perspective. Certain events of the future are seen grouped together in one circumscribed area of vision, although they are really at different distances. This is particularly true of the predictions of the so-called major prophets where many times prophecies concerning the Babylonian captivity, the events of the day of the Lord, the return from Babylon, the world wide dispersion of Israel, and their future re-gathering from all the corners of the earth, are grouped together seemingly almost indiscriminately.³⁷

Failure to observe this principle will result in confusion.

D. Observe the time relationships.

As has previously been pointed out, events that are widely separated as to the time of their fulfillment may be treated within one prophecy. This is particularly true in the prophecies concerning Christ, where events of the first and second advents are spoken of together as though taking place at the same time. In like manner the second and third dispersions of the Jews are viewed in prophecy as taking place without interruption. Feinberg refers to this principle by saying:

Another rule of prophetic interpretation is what is known as foreshortening which, according to Dr. Arthur T. Pierson, may assume any one of several forms. Two or more events of a like character may be described by a common Furthermore, a common and important example of foreshortening is evident where future events are placed side by side whereas in the fulfillment there is a great gap. . .³⁸

It is important to observe that the prophet may view widely separated events as continuous, or future things as either past or present.

E. Interpret prophecy Christologically.

The central theme of all prophecy is the Lord Jesus Christ. His person and His work is the grand theme of the prophetic story. Peter writes:

Of which salvation the prophets have inquired and searched diligently, who prophesied of the grace that should come unto you; Searching what, or what manner of time the Spirit of Christ which was in them did signify, when it testified beforehand the sufferings of Christ, and the glory that should follow [1 Pet. 1:10-11].

John writes: "...the testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy" (Rev. 19:10). Both are emphasizing this very fact.

F. Interpret historically.

It hardly need be pointed out that before one can interpret he must know the historical background of the prophet and the prophecy. Ramm says;

". . . a study of history is the absolute first starting point in any study of prophecy, whether the prophecy be didactic or predictive."³⁹ This historical background will include the full meaning and significance of all proper names, events, geographical references, references to customs or material culture, and references to flora and fauna."⁴⁰

G. Interpret grammatically.

Sufficient has been said earlier on this point to make it necessary to do no more here than remind the interpreter of prophecy that the strict rules that govern grammatical interpretation must be applied to this field of study with no less care.

H. Interpret according to the law of double reference.

This has likewise been dealt with previously. It is sufficient to be reminded that oftentimes in a prophecy there may be a near view and far view. Of these the near view may have been fulfilled and the far view await fulfillment, or both may be in the realm of fulfilled prophecy. Again there may have been a double reference to two events of similar character, both of which were in the distant future. The fact that part of the prophecy has been fulfilled without the fulfillment of the rest of It does not argue for a figurative or non-literal method of fulfillment of that unfulfilled portion, but such a partial fulfillment does promise a complete, literal, future fulfillment of the whole.

I. Interpret consistently.

It is impossible to mix the methods of interpretation in the field of prophecy. One method must be adopted and used consistently throughout. It may safely be stated that the problem in the interpretation of prophecy is this problem of consistency. To the degree we have been inconsistent in the application of sound hermeneutical principles we have been in error in our conclusions and interpretations. The observance of these sound rules of prophetic interpretation will lead one into a correct interpretation of the Scriptures.