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Interpreting Biblical Prophecy

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I. Introduction to Biblical Prophecy

- A. Definition of prophecy. The term “prophecy” literally means “to speak before.”
- B. Two types of prophecy
 1. Predicting the future Some biblical prophecy involves the actual prediction of future events.
 2. 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, often calling on the people to respond in obedience. The prophets often acted as *covenant enforcers* reminding the people of what God already said about blessings for obedience and curses for disobedience. Most biblical prophecy falls into this category.
- C. Extent of Bible prophecy It has been estimated that about one-fourth of the Bible was prophecy at the time the specific prophecies were written.
- D. Prophecy topics

1. Gentile nations
2. Israel
3. Individuals
4. Messiah
5. Earth
6. The Tribulation Period
7. The Kingdom of God

E. Prophecy in the Bible

1. Four major Old Testament prophets

- a. Isaiah
- b. Jeremiah
- c. Ezekiel
- d. Daniel

2. Twelve minor Old Testament prophets

- a. Hosea
- b. Joel
- c. Amos
- d. Obadiah
- e. Jonah
- f. Micah
- g. Nahum
- h. Habakkuk
- i. Zephaniah
- j. Haggai
- k. Zechariah
- l. Malachi

3. The Book of Revelation

4. The Olivet Discourse (Matt. 24-25 and Mark 13)

5. Second Thessalonians 1-2.

F. Prophecy ranges Some Bible prophecies have already been fulfilled while others still await a future fulfillment.

1. Examples of prophecies already fulfilled.

- a. Jeremiah's prophecy of the seventy-year captivity (Jer. 25:11).
- b. Daniel's prophecy that Belshazzar's kingdom would be taken over by the Medes and the Persians (Dan. 5:25-30).

c. Jesus' prediction that He would be killed and rise again (Matt.16:21)

2. Examples of prophecies awaiting a future fulfillment.

- a. The prediction of the angels that Jesus would return in the same way as He departed (Acts 1:11).
- b. The day of the Lord and the coming of the man of lawlessness (2 Thessalonians 2)
- c. The rapture of the saints (1 Thess. 4:13-18)
- d. The restoration of Israel (Ezek. 36-37)
- e. The binding of Satan and the millennial reign of Christ (Rev. 20)
- f. The destruction of the earth by fire (2 Peter 3)
- g. The new heavens and new earth (Rev. 21-22)

II. Apocalyptic Literature

- A. Apocalyptic literature is found within some of the prophetic books. Parts of Ezekiel, Daniel, Zechariah, and much of Revelation can be considered apocalyptic literature.
- B. The term "apocalyptic" comes from the Greek term *apokalypsis* which is translated "revelation" in Revelation 1:1.
- C. Most apocalyptic literature in the Bible was given during a time when Israel was in exile from her land and under the power of Gentile domination.
- D. Four characteristics of apocalyptic literature
 1. A prophet is given extensive visions.
 2. The vision includes many symbols.
 3. A heavenly messenger or angel is present and give the message to the prophet.
 4. The message involves the Messiah, the Tribulation Period, and the establishment of the Kingdom of God.

III. Principles for Interpreting Prophetic/Apocalyptic Literature

- A. Approach prophetic/apocalyptic literature with the same historical-grammatical-literary approach that you would use when interpreting other portions of Scripture. Coming into contact with prophetic literature does not mean that we switch our hermeneutical approach. Realize that behind each symbol and figure of speech in prophetic literature is a literal truth. The presence of symbols does not mean that symbolical or allegorical interpretation is necessary.

“Nowhere does Scripture indicate that when we come to prophetic portions of Scripture we should ignore the normal sense of the words and overlook the meanings of words and sentences. The norms of grammatical interpretation should be applied to prophetic as well as nonprophetic literature (Zuck, 241-42).

- B. Determine if the Bible prophecy you are looking at has already been fulfilled or not. (Consult a good Bible commentary or two to see if a prophecy already had a historical fulfillment.) Remember that many of the prophecies in the Old Testament have already been fulfilled.
- C. Look for explanations of prophetic symbols within the passage.
 - 1. Ex. Daniel 2 “Head of gold” = Nebuchadnezzar (“You are the head of gold.”)
 - 2. Ex. Revelation The seven stars are the angels of the churches (1:20). The seven lampstands are the seven churches of Asia Minor(1:20). The bowls of incense are the prayer of the saints (5:8).
- E. Recognize the occasional presence of partial fulfillments of prophecy and near/far fulfillments of prophecy.
 - 1. Isaiah 61:1-2 predicted the coming of the favorable year of the Lord and the day of vengeance of our God. In Luke 4:16-21 Jesus read this passage to show that he was the Messiah who would fulfill this passage. Note, though, that He stopped in the middle of verse 2 with the words “to proclaim the favorable year of the Lord.” He did not read “and the day of vengeance of our God,” a reference to the destruction of God’s enemies. Clearly Jesus fulfilled part of Isaiah’s prophecy at His first coming, but the fulfillment of the other part will take place later at His second coming.
 - 2. Isaiah 9:6a refers to Jesus’ birth but 9:6b-7 points to the second coming of Jesus. Then the government will rest on his shoulders and He will reign on David’s throne.
 - 3. Zechariah 9:9-10 Matthew 21:5 quotes Zechariah 9:9 in reference to the Messiah’s entrance into Jerusalem, but Matthew does not quote 9:10 which refers to Christ destroying His enemies and setting up His kingdom. Thus, 9:9 has already been fulfilled and 9:10 awaits a future fulfillment.
- F. While symbols in prophetic/apocalyptic literature point to other realities, it appears that the numbers in prophetic books can be taken literally. For example, numbers in the Book of Revelation such as 7

seals, 144,000 Israelites, 1260 days and 1,000 years probably can be taken at face value.

- G. Recognize the unconditional covenants in Scripture. On some occasions God makes unconditional covenants in which He says He will do something for His people. When no conditions are present we should assume that a literal fulfillment of the covenant promises will come true with the people to whom the covenant was made.
1. Abrahamic Covenant (Gen. 12:1-3; 13; 15; 17) This covenant promises blessings to Abraham, Abraham's descendants, and the nations.
 2. Davidic Covenant (2 Samuel 7:12-17) This covenant promises that a descendant of David will always rule from David's throne.
 3. New Covenant (Jeremiah 31:31-34) This covenant promises salvation and spiritual and physical blessings for the nation Israel.
- H. Realize that the bulk of New Testament prophecy (Matt. 24-25; 1 Thess. 4; 2 Thess. 2; Revelation) is still awaiting future fulfillment. Contrary to the claims of some that most or all of New Testament prophecy was fulfilled with the destruction of the Jerusalem temple in A.D. 70, most New Testament prophecy has not been fulfilled yet. The destruction of the temple may be an initial or partial fulfillment of prophecy but much of New Testament prophecy (i.e. coming of Jesus, revealing of the man of sin, abomination of desolation) have not happened yet.
- I. Approach biblical prophecy with a healthy balance and avoid extremes. Today two extremes are seen in regard to biblical prophecy. First, some try too hard to read current events into biblical prophecy. Although some recent events such as the reestablishment of Israel into her land in 1948 appear to have great prophetic significance, it is not healthy to interpret every earthquake, plane crash, terrorist attack, etc. as being the fulfillment of biblical prophecy. Second, some look at the symbolism and apocalyptic imagery of Daniel, Zechariah, and Revelation and then conclude that the study of prophecy is a hopeless event and something we should not have firm convictions about. Although prophecy is difficult, it is still part of God's inspired Word and worthy of intense study.

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