8. Interpreting Prophetic Writings (4Q 2026 Gift of Prophecy)

Biblical material: Matt. 5:17-48; 1 Cor. 16:20; Matt. 4:1-11; Luke 10:25-28; Luke 24:25-27, 44-49; Luke 24:27.

Quotes

- What is needed desperately today is prophetic insight. Scholars can interpret the past; it takes prophets to interpret the present. *Aiden Wilson Tozer*
- It is high time for Christians to interpret unfulfilled prophecy by the light of prophecies already fulfilled. *J.C. Ryle*
- A huge obstacle to interpreting prophecy correctly is the human tendency to see only what we want to see. That is, we like to cling to the verses that support our views and ignore the rest. *Kendrick Diaz*
- Literal or figurative? It all depends. Clearly some prophecies should be interpreted literally. Just as clearly, other prophecies should be interpreted figuratively. One should not have a prejudice for either the literal or the figurative. It is not an "either-or" matter. The student of God's Word must have an open mind and a willing heart to accept what the evidence shows in each case. *David Vaughan Elliott*
- In prophecy, the central or primary meaning is significant. Focus on this rather than the relatively minor details in the prophet's message. This is similar to how we interpret parables. We must try to avoid deriving obscure meanings from the various details of the prophecy. We should fix our attention on the central thrust of the prophet's discourse. *Kieran Beville*
- No question facing the student of Eschatology is more important than the question of the method to be employed in the interpretation of the prophetic Scriptures. The adoption of different methods of interpretation has produced the variant eschatological positions and accounts for the divergent views within a system that confront the student of prophecy. The basic differences between the premillennial and amillennial schools and between the pretribulation and posttribulation rapturists are hermeneutuical, arising from the adoption of divergent and irreconcilable methods of interpretation. *R. Dwight Pentecost*

Questions

Why are there so many different ways of interpreting prophecy? What should be our principles in understanding prophecy, or should we read it "like we're reading today's news"? How do we avoid being lumped in with some of the weird prophetic ideas floating around today? Have we admitted that some of our prophetic interpretations have been wrong?

Bible summary

In Matthew 5:17-48 Jesus says he came to fulfill what the prophets said. 1 Corinthians 16:20 has Paul's greetings to the church in Corinth. Matthew 4:1-11 records Jesus' temptations. Luke 10:25-28 is Jesus' answer to the lawyer who asked what he had to do to gain eternal life. In Luke 24:25-27, 44-49 Jesus explains that everything written about him by the prophets had to be fulfilled.

Comment

This study is particularly concerned with how we interpret prophecy. The same approach however should apply in all areas of life: examine, understand, and accept the evidence. In fact this is the same fundamental principle that underlies the scientific method. The essential aspect is evaluating and thinking logically about what is presented, and drawing the correct conclusions.

Most of all we are looking for meaning—not just any meaning, but the meaning that was intended, and the source that brings meaning to life.

Let's look at some of the common mistakes in interpreting prophecy.

Here a little, there a little

By choosing pieces of prophecy and stitching them together, we can make prophecy say just about whatever we want. In many cases this is the problem with modern prophetic interpretation—all kinds of bizarre ideas can flourish if we allow such piecemeal approach that doesn't take any notice of sense or context. Often this is result of "working backwards" from some "conclusion" we wish to draw and then looking for bits of prophecy that might seem to support it. Such results can be rejected as doing violence to the meaning of scripture if they do not take a wider view of a whole prophecy and look at the situation in which it was given.

So for example, a belief taken from prophecy in some "secret coming" of Jesus is rejected by many prophetic texts such as "every eye shall see him," (Revelation 1;7), coming with 'a shout, the cry of the archangel, and the trumpet call of God " (1 Thessalonians 4:16), like "lightning flashing from the east to the west" (Matthew 24:27) etc.

Prophecy as allegory

This was a favorite of some early church fathers, and it is still around today. This "interpretation" of prophecy ignores the plain meaning and makes it all about some spiritual or hidden allegory. That' not to say that some prophecies do not contain figures and symbols, such as the beasts in Daniel and Revelation. But they are usually clearly identified as such. If there is no indication otherwise, prophecy should be taken in its simplest sense.

There are many examples of this. One medieval one is that the story of Jonah and the big fish was an allegory of Jesus being crucified and resurrected. Another is Origen's explanation of the meaning of Jesus' parable of the Good Samaritan: the victim is Adam who was coming from Paradise (Jerusalem) to the world (Jericho). The priest that passes by is the Law, and the Levit represents the prophets. Christ is the Samaritan who carries the wounded man on his body (the donkey), and the man's wounds are his sins. At this point the man becomes the Church, and the promise of the Samaritan to return is the second coming. In both these examples there is nothing in the original stories to indicate that these are prophecies at all!

Prophecy is past history

This interpretation states that all prophecy has already happened. The term for this is "preterism." So Jesus has already returned, the resurrection has already happened, and the new heaven and new earth have already arrived! To make this believable everything has to be "spiritualized" as a description of the world today. A symbolic meaning has replaced a literal one, and basically there is nothing to hope for in the future from a prophetic perspective. That this denies much of Biblical reality cannot be doubted!

Prophecy may spread across time

Sometimes there is a long time lapse between an initial fulfillment of prophecy and its eventual conclusion. For example in John 5 Jesus speaks of the resurrection of the good and the bad. But Revelation 20 makes it clear that there is an interval of 1,000 years between these two events. In Luke 4, when Jesus stood up and read from the scroll of Isaiah (chapter 61), he only quoted part of the prophecy that he said was being fulfilled right then—in his life and ministry on earth. The rest of its fulfillment would have to wait until the end times. We need to see the whole picture.

Ellen White Comments

Revelation is a sealed book, but it is also an opened book. It records marvelous events that are to take place in the last days of this earth's history. The teachings of this book are definite, not mystical and unintelligible. In it the same line of prophecy is taken up as in Daniel. Some prophecies God has repeated, thus showing that importance must be given to them. The Lord does not repeat things that are of no great consequence. {9MR 7}