

IX. Some hermeneutical principles for interpretation of the prophetic writings.

(See bibliography for resources)

A. Some general characteristics of predictive prophecy.

1. The purpose of predictive prophecy

Two aspects of biblical prophecy have sometimes been called "forthtelling" and "foretelling." By forthtelling is meant exhortation, reproof, correction and instruction. By foretelling is meant prediction of events to come, some immediate, some more distant, and some very distant.

Not infrequently the forthtelling aspect of the prophetic message is neglected in favor of its foretelling aspect in a way that obscures the fundamental purpose of the prophetic message.

Predictive prophecy is not given to cater to the appetite of the curious who want to know the future - and it should not be used as such today.

The predictive element in prophecy should never be isolated from its parenetic function. (That is even the predictive aspect of the prophet's message was meant to instruct, to reprove, to correct, and to encourage.)

Dyrness, CC, 20.

Wilson, CC, 20.

Ross, CC, 20.

1 John 3:3; 2 Peter 3:11,14; 1 Thess 5:1-11

The predictive element in prophecy is given to show that God's program of redemption moves forward according to his divine purpose and schedule. He is the LORD of history and all peoples and nations are subject to his sovereign ordering of the historical process as it moves toward the conclusion that He has purposed. This fact is intended to affect the manner of life of the hearer of the message, whether in ancient Israel or today.

The prophets spoke to their contemporaries. Their message may have a future aspect, but the message in its totality was given to influence the people of the prophet's own time to godly living. The prophet spoke to induce holy living and obedience to God among God's people in his own

time. We must not lose sight of this, because this is an important part of the reason for the initial delivery of the message.

2. Predictive prophecy and history writing.

There are two common but erroneous views of the nature of the relationship between predictive prophecy and history writing because the distinction in literary form between prophetic discourse and historical discourse is often not discerned.

- a. Predictive prophecy is a captivating form of historical writing produced subsequent to the events its describes.

This is the general position of the rationalistic higher critics by which they explain many predictive passages in the Bible as being vaticinium ex eventu (i.e. they were written after the events which they claim to predict.)

Cf. Mickelsen, **CC, 21**.

- b. Predictive prophecy is history written beforehand.

This is also not the case. Prophetic discourse does not normally give as complete a picture of an event as does historical discourse. Historical writings provide many particulars, while prophetic discourse normally has an enigmatic character due to a scarcity of details (see Mickelsen).

The enigmatic character of prophetic discourse does not negate the recognizability of fulfillment when it comes. But fulfillment may come in ways not completely foreseen or anticipated.

For example notice the prophecy of Isa. 9:1-2 that Matt 4:12-16 cites as having been fulfilled in the time that Jesus made Capernaum the headquarters of his Galilean ministry (instead of Nazareth).

The prophecy in Isaiah is in the section of Isaiah called the Book of Immanuel (Isaiah 7-12), one of the most frequently quoted sections of Isaiah in the New Testament. The verses appear in the context of a particular historical situation that existed in the time the prophecy was made. Ahaz had sought aid from the Assyrians in order to strengthen himself against an attack from the N. Kingdom and Syria. This was not in accord with the LORD's will, and eventually led to Assyrian domination of the northern part of Israel and to an Assyrian threat to the Southern kingdom as well.

In these verses a very dark picture is drawn for the region north of the Sea of Galilee (cf. 2 Kgs 15:29) that was devastated by Tiglath Pileser. Isaiah, however, says that at some future time this darkness will be dispelled by a great light.

That great light was Jesus in his Galilean ministry which was centered in this very area.

Isaiah's prophecy, however, does not contain all the particulars of historical discourse. This is usually the case with prediction. There is usually a certain enigmatic character to predictive prophecies prior to their fulfillment. This distinguishes them from historical discourse.

3. The progressive character of predictive prophecy (Mickelsen, 292)

As with revelation in general, so with predictive prophecy in particular, there is a gradual unfolding and development. "Later revelation often discloses elements omitted from earlier revelation. Even so the sum total of what God discloses does not comprise a complete picture. The progressive character of prophecy gives us more materials. Yet ambiguity and enigma are not [altogether] eliminated by [the] greater quantity."

For example, consider "antichrist." The picture of this enemy develops slowly. When we have marshalled all of the evidence, the picture becomes clearer, but there are still many uncertain features.

Daniel 7:8,21 - in these verses a little horn is spoken of (in the context of the 4th beast who had 10 horns) which makes war with the saints. It seems to indicate an imperial leader and an imperial government opposed to God and his people, until the time comes that the saints possessed the kingdom.

Daniel 9:27; 12:11 mention the abomination of desolation - some gross sacrilege in the temple (11:31 - Antiochus Epiphanes)

Matt 24:15; Mark 13:14 - take up the same theme, abomination of desolation with Mark indicating that this is closely connected with some man, a prophet.

2 Thess 2:4 - the man of sin who represents himself as God and sits in the temple. the one that restrains must first be removed (what or who is that?) and then this man of sin will appear, whom the LORD will destroy.

Rev. 13 - the beast of the sea has all the characteristics of the little horn of Daniel 7 - the destruction of this leader is described in Rev. 19:20.

Here we have an example of the progressive character of predictive prophecy that gives sufficient information to make the anti-christ a recognizable individual once he has appeared. But we also see the enigmatic features of this material that resist attempts to draw a detailed picture of him in advance. This characteristic of prophecy must be recognized by all interpreters. Where it is forgotten an unhealthy dogmatism arises. (adapted from Mickelsen)

4. Predictive prophecy has its own peculiar time perspective.

For the most part time is not stressed in precise terms in predictive prophecy (there are, of course, some exceptions to this general characteristic of predictive prophecy). Frequently a number of events are compressed into what appears to be a very brief span of time. This is sometimes referred to as the "prophetic time perspective" or as Delitzsch calls it, "the foreshortening of the prophet's horizon." As has often been pointed out the prophets look on the future as the traveler does upon a mountain range in the distance. He sees one mountain-top rising up right behind the other, when in reality they are miles apart.

Berkhof, p. 150, **CC 21**.

Keil (Introduction, Vol. 1, 275) says that in general because of the nature of predictive prophecy "the prophets in the Spirit behold the future as if it were present; that to their spirit the images and configurations of the future appear as present, as already actual realities. This explains not only the predominant use of the so-called prophetic perfect in predictive discourses, but also the fact that the chronological order of the predicted events retires into the background, prophecy assuming a so-called perspective character."

Isa 61:1,2, Cf., Lk 4:16-21.

5. The message of predictive prophecy may be couched in culturally dated terminology.

The prophets spoke to the people of their day in the language, thought patterns and cultural setting of their own time.. Naturally use is made of terminology that was appropriate for that time. For example, when the prophet speaks of transportation he talks about horses, chariots, camels, small ships, larger grain boats etc. When he speaks about armaments, he mentions spears, shields, swords, etc. When he discusses the means and manner of worship he may refer to the temple and sacrifices. His outlook

upon the world of his day is in terms of the nations that then surrounded Israel, Philistia, Moab, Syria, Ethiopia, Egypt, Edom, Babylon etc.

With this in mind there are at least three possible ways to approach this particular feature of predictive prophecy.

- a. The interpreter may insist on a literal fulfillment of culturally dated terminology down to its details. If a prophet mentions horses and bridles, there will be horses and bridles at the time of fulfillment. If a prophet mentions shields, bucklers, bows and arrows, then these exact weapons will be utilized at the time of fulfillment.

To do this, however, seems not to take sufficiently into account the cultural milieu of the prophet and the people to whom he ministered. Had the prophet used 20th century or 15th century terminology then his message would have been meaningless to the people to whom he spoke. He spoke in language that would be understandable to his audience.

- b. In contrast to a) the interpreter may insist on a symbolic meaning of an entire prophecy (spiritualization). In this case the words are not understood in a physical or material sense at all, but, rather, are viewed as symbolic of spiritual realities and forces.
- c. The interpreter may approach such terminology by looking for equivalents, analogy or correspondence. This view accepts figurative language but does not spiritualize. It still views the language as referring to tangible material realities. The transportation (chariots) of the prophet's day will have a corresponding equivalent in the time of its fulfillment. The weapons will have counterparts. The enemies of God's people in the time of the prophet will be replaced by later enemies, and so on.

See Isa 11:11-16. Young, p. 396 ff. **CC 23** and Joel 3:19.

There is of course danger here of arbitrary application. The only solution to this difficulty is to let the nature of each text supply its own criteria for decision. There may of necessity be some lack of certainty in interpretation. (Cf. Davidson, 167-169; **CC 21-23**).

Ezekiel's temple (Ex 40-48) cf. Mickelsen, 296ff; Buswell, Vol. 2, p. 537-38.

6. Predictive prophecy may be conditional.

That is to say the fulfillment of some prophecies may be dependent on the contingent actions of men. The condition may be expressed directly, hinted at generally, or not stated at all. Yet it may be a vital part of the prophecy.

Jeremiah 18:5-10.

**A stated condition:**

1 Kgs 11. When Ahijah promised Jeroboam he would become king of Israel he predicted that God would build him a sure house as He had done for David. But this was connected with a condition: (vs. 38a) "If thou wilt harken unto all that I command thee, and wilt walk in my ways, and do that is right in my sight to keep my statutes and my commandments, as David my servant did" Since Jeroboam did not fulfill the conditions this prediction was not fulfilled, instead his house was destroyed (1 Kgs 15:29,30).

**An unstated condition for an aspect of a prediction:**

When Elijah met Ahab and pronounced his doom for the Naboth incident he said (1 Kgs 21:19) "Thus saith the LORD, In the place where dogs licked the blood of Naboth shall dogs lick thy blood, even thine." When Ahab humbled himself (vs. 27) the LORD said to Elijah (vs. 29): "Seest thou how Ahab humbleth himself before me? Because he humbleth himself before me, I will not bring the evil in his days: but in his son's days will I bring the evil upon his house." The complete destruction of the dynasty of Ahab was accomplished during the reign of his second son, whose dead body was cast onto the plot of ground that had been stolen from Naboth (2 Kgs 9:26). Thus the prediction of doom to Ahab and his house was unconditionally fulfilled, but the time element was changed in view of Ahab's brief period of repentance.

Probably a similar situation in Jonah:

"Yet forty days and Nineveh shall be overthrown" (3:4). The time element would seem to have been conditional, but the prediction of destruction unconditional. Eventually Nineveh suffered one of the greatest destructions recorded in history.

Isaiah 38:1-5, Hezekiah.

J. B. Payne places some limits on conditionality lest all prophecy, including that at the heart of God's redemptive program, be rendered uncertain of fulfillment. Certainly there is a sense in which God's promise to Abraham, for example, "In thy seed all the nations of the earth shall be blessed" is not conditioned on what any man would do to insure its ultimate fulfillment. So Payne suggests that for a prophecy to be conditional it must meet the following two qualifications:

1. Must be of near application.
2. Must possess elements capable of satisfaction by the prophet's contemporaries.

Perhaps this is too restrictive to the present era particularly with respect to the time aspect of the Day of the LORD. 2 Peter 3:9, 12, cf. NIVSB note. Is the return of Lord conditional on evangelization of all peoples? Matt 24:14; Mark 13:10 (Some place in tribulation period.)

Oehler, p. 492.

7. Kinds of predictive prophecy.

Mickelsen, p. 300.

A distinction should be made between direct prediction and typological prediction.

Direct prediction consists of a prophetic statement which has its fulfillment solely in the future (e.g., the birth of Christ at Bethlehem, Micah 5:2; Matt 2:5,6). This sort of prediction is a verbal assertion concerning something that is to take place in the future.

A typological prediction is an institution, person or event which finds its highest application of meaning in an institution person or event of a later period in redemptive history (e.g., the passover lamb, the serpent on the pole in the wilderness). This sort of prediction is accomplished by prefiguring or imaging.

Fairbairn, p. 67 as quoted by Stek, CTJ, p. 139, **CC 24a**.

"A type is a historical reality which served a significant historical purpose within its own historical horizon . . . but it was also fashioned by Providence in such a way as to contribute to the larger purpose of God, namely to reveal in successive stages and operations the very truths and principles which were to find in the realities of the Gospel their more complete manifestation."

A type thus takes on the function of prophecy. It differs from word prophecy or direct prophecy in that it images or prefigures, while the other foretells by assertion.

The history of interpretation tells us that it is difficult to keep a proper perspective in the interpretation of types. How far does one go? Certain OT realities are pointed out specifically in the NT as being types. But must the interpreter limit himself to these? Cannot others be pointed to?

Mickelsen p. 263, **CC 24a**.

"Often typology becomes an excuse for sensationalism in interpretation. Such sensationalism must be firmly repudiated by every honest interpreter. But if an interpreter, fully aware of the unity of the people of God, can show historical correlations while being aware of the differences between the type and the antitype, he certainly may observe such historical parallels. But in such an activity the interpreter must discipline himself severely"

The greatest danger of excess lies in the tendency toward allegory. The way to avoid an allegorical interpretation is to be certain that the correspondence between type and antitype retains oneness of meaning. In other words, "types are historical realities, persons, events, or institutions which by God's appointment embody and therefore exhibit the same truths principles and relationships as the corresponding NT realities." (Stek, CTJ, p. 138).

Vos, 144-147, **CC 25**.

"Typology thus emphasizes that God has so ordered history that this correspondence between type and antitype were sovereignly ordained. As the architects' models and sketches are controlled by his clear vision of the building which will some day serve his client's purpose, so the Lord of redemption history ordained certain matters in the earlier dispensation which had their archetypes in the later." (Stek, p. 137, **CC 24b**).

Allegory loses sight of the oneness of meaning in the progression of redemptive history.

E.g. Story of Herod's slaughter of infants of Bethlehem. Chrysostom: "The fact that only the children if 2 years old and under were murdered while those of three presumably escaped is meant to teach us that those who hold the Trinitarian faith will be saved whereas Binitarians and Unitarians will undoubtedly perish."

Mickelsen, p. 263, **CC 24**.

No one should launch out on a career of finding more types until he has carefully studied all of the NT examples of typology first. A thorough understanding of these will take time and effort. But the understanding gained in such an undertaking is well worth that effort. In the NT typology was used to make prominent the message of God's grace in Christ - not to exalt the teacher. Interpreters who are faithful to the NT can only do the same thing. Any typology which is farfetched or artificial will ultimately only hinder the proclamation of the gospel. Hence care in the employment of Typology will always be essential."

(C.f. Schofield notes on tabernacle, p. 103, 104.)

Hosea 11:1 - cf. Dreams, Visions, Oracles, p. 91,92.

B. Some guidelines for interpretation of prophecy

1. Make a careful grammatical-historical-contextual analysis of the passage (Mickelsen p. 299).

This is fundamental, and is the first task of the interpreter. He must understand the meaning of the words (study usage elsewhere) and the exact relationship which the words have to each other. He should know the historical background of the prophet and the people to whom the prophet ministers. He should note the context that precedes the passage and the context that follows the passage. The flow of thought from the preceding passage and on to that which follows should be clear in the interpreter's mind. Any parallel passages that may shed some light should be consulted. But in comparing passages he must be sure to treat each from the grammatical-historical-contextual approach before comparisons are drawn.

2. Determine explicitly to whom or to what the statements of the passage refer. Focus on the exact message.

You might ask the following questions:

- a. Is the message about the hearers or reader to whom it is addressed? Or is it proclaimed to them but about someone else?

Here is a good place to observe whether a passage is basically predictive or didactic? Or are the two fused in a way that needs to be distinguished?

- b. If it is predictive - are there any conditions attached?
- c. If it is predictive - is it fulfilled or unfulfilled?

To answer this we must first search scripture for fulfillment within recorded biblical history. Some OT prophecies were fulfilled in the OT shortly after they were given. Some were fulfilled in the NT and are explicitly said to be fulfilled in the NT. Some remain to be fulfilled.

3. Pay attention to fulfillment citations.

There are certain fulfillment citations that occur in the NT that may be of help in determining whether or not a specific OT passage has been already fulfilled or still awaits fulfillment.

ἵνα (ὅπως) πληρωθῆ Normally quite specific with fulfillment in view. In some cases may be taken as denoting a relationship of illustration of similarity in words or ideas to an OT statement which in itself was not predictive.

Cf. R. L. Harris,  
Passages cited to illustrate a point rather than as direct predictions.

James 2:21-23/Gen 5:6

Matt 2:18/Jer 31:15 - weeping for woes of Babylonian captivity - the verses are quite general and can be used of any tragedy.

Both passages use fulfill. Does this mean these passages were wrongly cited as predictions? Or that Matthew's method of interpretation was wrong? The problem is caused by the translation of πληρωθῆ as fulfill. That it can mean fulfill is clear. But that it always means fulfill is not so clear. Cf. James 2:23. Fulfill is sometimes used as a *formula of citation* rather than *formula of fulfilled prediction*. This broader usage should be kept in mind when reading the Matt passages.

Specific: Matt 1:22; 8:17; 12:17; 21:4

Relationship: James 2:21-23/Gen 5:6; Matt 2:17,18/Jer 31:15.

καθὼς (ὅτι) γεγραπτα Often shows fulfillment, but may simply be a reference to something in the O.T.

Fulfillment: Mark 1:2

Reference: Matt 4:4; Acts 15:15.

Various forms of λέγω When it stands by itself most often it is indicative of historical reference or application - not fulfillment.

Matt 22:31; Acts 7:48

#### 4. Avoid the idea of double fulfillment or double reference

When we look for the fulfillment of a prophecy we should not adopt the idea of double reference or double sense as an underlying hermeneutical principle governing the interpretation of predictive prophecy.

That is, we should not assume that a given prophecy may refer to two or more different events (the one near, and the others more distant) at the same time with the same words. To do so presupposes that the same words, in the same context, may have multiple meanings.

This principle applies to the interpretation of all biblical statements, not only predictive ones.

See Pentecost. **CC 29.**

Note the comment of Erich Sauer: Dawn of World Redemption, p. 14.  
**CC 29.**

Klein, Blomberg, Hubbard, Introduction to Bib. Interp. Word, 1993, p. 305: “We must add a second characteristic of prophecy : it may have two fulfillments, one near the prophet’s lifetime and one long past it.”

Luther and Calvin insisted that it is the duty of the interpreter to arrive at the plain sense of the text intended by its author. Luther said: “Only the single, proper, original sense, the sense in which it is written, makes good theologians. The Holy Spirit is the simplest writer and speaker in heaven and earth. Therefore his words can have no more than a singular and simple sense, which we call the written or literally spoken sense.” (Quoted by Jepsen, Essays on OT Herm., 254,255).

Westminster Confession, Chapter I, Section 9:

“The infallible rule of interpretation of Scripture is the Scripture itself; and therefore, when there is a question about the true and full sense of any Scripture (which is not manifold, but one) it may be searched and known by other places that speak more clearly.”

Bright, **CC 26.**

But this problem has not disappeared since the time of the reformers. Note the comment of B. Ramm (p. 87): “One of the most persistent hermeneutical sins is to put two interpretations on one passage of Scripture, breaking the force of the literal meaning and obscuring the Word of God.”

Payne, **CC 28.**

Terry, **CC 29.**

Examples:

Old Scofield Bible on Daniel 8.

Malachi 4:5,6

Fulfillment in N.T? - or yet to be fulfilled - or both?

NT references to Elijah:

Matt 17:3 - appearance of Elijah on Mt. of Transfiguration, but no indication given that this is to be understood as a fulfillment of the Malachi prophecy.

There is more indication that it is to be understood as fulfilled in the life and ministry of John the Baptist:

Luke 1:17 - quote of Mal 4:6

Matt 11:10 - quote of Mal 3:1

Matt 11:14 - John = Elijah

Matt 17:10-13 (Mark 9:10-13)

John 1:21 - denial

Views:

1. **Double reference**

What is meant in Malachi's prophecy is that Elijah will literally return to earth before the Day of the LORD. This was the view of the Rabbis (cf., Matt 17:10; John 1:21) of the 1st century. Double reference advocates see Malachi's prophecy as having an initial and partial fulfillment in John the Baptist, but argue that it awaits a complete and final fulfillment preceding the second coming of Christ.

Alford, **CC 26** on Matt 11:13,14.

2. **Generic view**

A somewhat different twist is given to the Malachi prophecy by suggesting the idea of *generic prophecy*. This concept has been advocated by W. C. Kaiser (borrowed from W. Beecher) in various of his writings.

Kaiser, **CC 27**.

In my view Kaiser appears to want to have it both ways. He often speaks of the "single truth intention of the author" as the only valid meaning for any biblical statement. But, at the same time, he allows for multiple

fulfillments of biblical statements by means of his concept of “generic prophecy.” It does not seem to me that he escapes the hermeneutical problem of multiple sense by labeling the succession of fulfillments as unified in the “single truth intention of the author.” This method makes the single truth intention unduly abstract, and I question whether the author ever had such an abstract conception. Besides, how do we establish what this abstract single truth intention might have been. We can only look at what the prophets said. And when we look at what the prophets said, it seems to me that we then also must look for a single and specific meaning.

3. **The prophecy is fulfilled in John the Baptist.**

This is based on the references in the NT that apply the prophecy explicitly to John. There are strong and clear statements. In addition, the NT gives no clear grounds for looking for a still future fulfillment (the two witnesses of Rev. 11:3-14 are not identified, although they come with a power similar to that of Moses and Elijah). In this instance the prophecy concerning Elijah is taken in much the same sense as the prophecies that speak of a future reign of David when a reference to Christ is clearly intended (cf., Jer 30:9; Ex 34:23; Hos 3:5).

John 1:21 is then understood as a denial of the misconception of the Rabbi’s looking for a literal fulfillment.

5. Interpretive analysis must precede a decision on the exact relationship between the literal and the figurative in any passage.

If an interpreter is of the opinion that a certain expression or passage is to be understood in a figurative sense he is obligated to give reasons for this conclusion.

Mickelsen, CC 32.

This raises the difficult question of how theological systems relate to individual passages. Do you interpret the passage on the basis of the system, or do you build the system on the basis of the exegesis of individual passages? In practice this is usually not an either or situation. But one must constantly guard against letting the system determine the meaning. Meaning is to be derived from the text not brought to the text.

Boettner, **CC 31.**

Turner, **CC 32.**