

The Biblical Story of Prophecy



The Kingdom Established

Covenant Heritage Series – Book Six

LAWRENCE BLANCHARD

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The Septuagint Bible. Translated by Charles Thomson, 1808, Philadelphia: PA. Edited by C.A. Muses.

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All bold notations are the author's except where it is in an original quoted text from another source in which case it will be indicated by "Emphasis in the original."

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Introduction

Is Jesus coming soon? Are we living in the “end times”? What is the latest “sign of the times” that “the end” is near? There is, perhaps, no greater interest today than “last days” theology. It seems to be a topic dominating discussion and speculation. After all, most people love to talk about what will happen in the future. Predictions about anything, both religious and secular, have always abounded. In Christian circles, predicting when Jesus Christ will return is a really hot topic. For some, it’s an obsession.

Track Record

It’s not just a peak modern-day interest. Prophecy and predictions about Jesus’ “second coming”¹ go back to the first century AD. Since then, there have been more than 200 prophetic declarations² that Jesus would return within a certain time period. All of them, so far, have failed to come true.

The following is a sample of some of these failed predictions:

- Baptist preacher William Miller, father of the Millerite Movement, made several predictions that Jesus’ “second coming” would be on March 21, then April 18, and finally October 22, 1844.
- Jehovah’s Witnesses have logged in at least nine separate prophetic doomsday predictions of various sorts leading up to the return of Christ in 1874, 1878, 1881, 1910, 1914, 1918, 1925, 1975 and 1984.

¹ The phrase “second coming” is common, but it is not found in the Bible.

² Verification of failed prophetic declarations can be found here: www.bible.ca/pre-date-setters.htm.

- More recently, in the latter twentieth century, widely popular Christian Zionist author Hal Lindsey (*Late Great Planet Earth*) predicted that “the Rapture” would take place before December 31, 1981. He later revised his prediction to May 14, 1988 which was 40 years after the State of Israel was founded.
- Likewise, Edgar Whisenant wrote his book, *88 Reasons Why the Rapture is in 1988*.
- F.M. Riley, in his book *1994 the Year of Destiny*, foretold God’s plan to rapture the saints.
- Harold Camping, founder and broadcaster of the radio station Family Radio, predicted the return of Christ in September of 1994 in his book *Are You Ready*. When that didn’t happen, he then revised the date to May 21, 2011. Camping further predicted the date of the physical end of the planet as October 21, 2011.
- Stan Johnson of The Prophecy Club claimed the tribulation would start on September 12, 1997.
- Dan Miller called for September 21, 2000 as the date for the second coming of Christ.
- Jack Van Impe predicted first 2000 and then 2012 as dates for the “second coming,” as well as “international chaos in 2001.”
- According to a survey conducted by the Brookings Institute’s Center for Middle East Policy entitled “American Attitudes Toward the Middle East and Israel,” 79 percent of all evangelical Christians in America believe that “the unfolding violence across the Middle East is a sign that the end times are nearer.” ... 81 percent of evangelicals believe that Jesus will return to this planet.³

With so many unfulfilled predictions, it’s no wonder people are exasperated and say: “It will all pan out in the end.” Or as the bumper sticker of a disgusted cynic states: “Jesus is coming soon – Look busy!”

³Michael Snyder, December 9, 2015, TheMostImportantNews.com/archives.

Implications of Failed Prophecies

The ongoing, unanswered question regarding the coming of Jesus Christ has become nothing more than continued speculation and an entertaining distraction. A more disturbing observation is the belief that Jesus is yet to come, which tends to create a defeatist mindset. It's believed that there is really nothing anyone can do to change the wicked and destructive course of this world system. The rapid decline of culture, the seemingly unstoppable decay of morality, the prospect of certain economic collapse, and the ever-present threat to safety and security seems overwhelming and beyond hope of reversing in order to restore justice, peace and order.

Perhaps that's why many keep alive this fervent hope that Jesus will come again soon. Without that hope, there is no hope for us. Because when He comes back, He's going to clean up this big unsolvable mess for us. Until then, we are paralyzed and without purpose and power.

Behind this powerless, helpless, do-nothing position is the reality of a schizophrenic⁴ theology.

- With a futuristic perspective that Jesus is yet to come, we claim He is Lord of all, but not completely Lord of all for all practical purposes.
- We sing with conviction “All Hail the Power of Jesus’ Name,” but have no faith that He can and will overcome and defeat the present anti-Christ enemies until He returns.
- We believe nothing is impossible with God, but in reality, there are some things that are not yet possible.
- We read in the Bible that the church is seated with Jesus in authority and power, but actually believe that that is of little practical consequence.

⁴ Schizophrenia is “a mental illness characterized by incoherent or illogical thoughts, bizarre behavior and speech, and delusions or hallucinations...”
– American Psychological Association

- We are commanded to seek first His Kingdom and His righteousness, but have no faith that His Kingdom can ever be realized on earth as it is in heaven until Jesus comes back.
- The Kingdom is among us, but not yet.
- Jesus reigns as Sovereign King, but not yet.

So, we are, in reality, in “no man’s land.” We have no hope that anything can change. Most believe everything will just get worse. As such, any course of effective, positive activism and action is limited to what we can control – the survival of our families. Maybe.

All we can do is hope that we are now living in the final period of the “last days.” “The signs of the times” that precede the return of Jesus Christ give us reassurance that it is just around the corner. So we will continue to pursue biblical theology, and its truth will be endlessly discussed and debated. Powerless, theoretical theology. Yes, let’s talk about the Lordship of Jesus Christ. Let’s sing of it. But heaven forbid we should believe in its fullness until He comes back again – no matter how long it takes.

With the total failure of centuries of predictions of Jesus’ soon return, and in view of our apparent inability to put action into our faith regarding the supremacy of Jesus Christ, perhaps we need to ask some questions about perspective:

- Where are we now in God’s timeline?
- What are we supposed to be doing and why?
- What is the point of nearly two thousand years of delay of the return of Jesus Christ?
- Is biblical theology only personal (how I can get closer to Jesus) or should it encompass everything?

Understanding our purpose in this time is lost to us unless we can find definitive answers to these questions. So, with that objective in mind, we need to start over. This book seeks to examine the biblical evidence about the coming or return of Jesus Christ.

The Reason for this Book

Specifically, the primary purpose of this book is to examine what the Bible says about **when** Jesus would come. What did Jesus and the Apostles teach regarding **the time frame** when He would return?

What this book intends to do is provide a systematic, comprehensive presentation of the biblical evidence and draw a reasonable conclusion from the preponderance of that evidence⁵ concerning when Jesus would return.

What this book **cannot** do is provide a complete commentary addressing **all** the many prophetic biblical passages with respect to the various aspects of the coming of Jesus Christ. As you may imagine, the subject of prophecy alone is extensive and would require multiple volumes of books. So any expectation beyond the single focus of this book concerning the **time frame** of Jesus' coming will surely result in disappointment and frustration.

The conclusion about **when** Jesus would come may help us to understand the purpose and mission God has ordained for us in the days in which we are living. Like "the sons of Issachar, men who understood the times, with knowledge of what Israel should do" (I Chronicles 12:32) in respect to establishing the kingdom of all Israel to David at that time, so we will be able to understand our times regarding the establishment of the Kingdom of God. And we will know what should be done and needs to be done when we realize what Jesus and the Apostles said about His coming. Our purpose and mission hang upon the answer to this question.

The answer to this question about the timing of Jesus' return will begin to solve a multitude of issues and help awaken today's Israelite people to the reality of effectively ruling and reigning with Jesus the King.

⁵ Preponderance of evidence: Evidence which is of greater weight or more convincing than the evidence which is offered in opposition to it ... Evidence which is more credible and convincing to the mind ... That which best accords with reason and probability. – *Black's Law Dictionary*, Special Deluxe Fifth Edition, (St. Paul, MN: West Publishing Co., 1979).

The Plan of this Book

To accomplish this purpose, this book is laid out in three sections. The first section provides the preparation necessary to objectively and consistently examine the biblical evidence regarding the time frame of Jesus' coming. Briefly, we will cover basic definitions and various views of prophecy about Jesus' coming. We will then discuss the most important principles of interpretation, especially in regard to dealing with biblical prophecy. We must agree on standardly applied methods to rightly understand prophetic passages of Scripture.

The second section will cover the teaching of Jesus Himself on the subject of His prophesied coming, mainly from the synoptic Gospel accounts – Matthew, Mark and Luke.

In the third section, we will discuss the pertinent writings of the Apostles concerning Jesus' coming. Was what the Apostles wrote on this subject consistent with what Jesus said regarding when He would come again?

Finally, we will gather the preponderance of evidence concerning what the Bible says about the time frame of Jesus' "second coming" and draw the most reasonable conclusion and related implications.

Our hope is that we will, by God's grace, have a clearer focus of God's purpose and mission for our lives now and a renewing of life itself by the Holy Spirit.

Lawrence Blanchard, N.D., M.Div.
2017

Section One

Setting the Stage

Before we begin our biblical study to determine the time frame of the coming of Jesus Christ from the evidence of Scripture, there are critical considerations and issues that must first be discussed.

In addition to a brief review of general definitions and differing views of prophecy in respect to Jesus' coming, we will also answer two important questions:

- How shall we interpret prophetic literature?
- What is the context in which prophecy must be interpreted?

Knowledge, understanding and agreement of these principles of interpretation will set the stage to help us in our study.

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1

Definitions and Views

This chapter will offer an overview of the definition of prophecy as it relates to the study of eschatology, along with presenting the widely-held, differing views of eschatology.

Definition of Eschatology

Although the definition of “eschatology” has changed over time, primarily to suit particular belief systems, the basic one is simply:

... the doctrine of “last things” (Greek *eschata*) – in relation either to the individual human being (in which case they comprise death, resurrection, judgment and the afterlife) or to the world. In this latter respect, some would confine “eschatology” to the absolute end of the world, thus excluding much that commonly falls within its scope ...¹

Other words associated within eschatology, such as the Greek words translated “coming” and “revelation,” for example, will be covered in Sections Two and Three.

¹ Everett F. Harrison, Geoffrey W. Bromiley and Carl F.H. Henry, *Baker’s Dictionary of Theology*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1960), p. 187. Note: the phrase “end of the world” here probably refers to the popular view encompassing the global world system, both physical and spiritual.

General Views of Eschatology

There are four major views concerning all related topics of “last things.” We have taken excerpts from Theopedia.com to whom we are grateful for an accurate summation of the following:

Premillennialism

Premillennialism teaches that the Second coming will occur before a literal thousand-year reign of Christ from Jerusalem upon the earth.

Premillennialists fall into two primary categories: **historic premillennialism** and **dispensational premillennialism**.

Historic premillennialists reject the idea of a pre-tribulation rapture and the uniquely Jewish nature of the dispensationalist’s millennial kingdom (see below).

Dispensational premillennialists propose that Christ’s return will precede the millennium but will be in two stages: First, to rapture his saints, leaving all others behind, and then after seven years of tribulation, to publicly institute his visible millennial reign.

By contrast, historic premillennialists would be generally categorized as “Post-tribulationists” because they see no appreciable difference in the timing of the rapture and the “official” second coming. Thus they hold that Christ will not return until the end of the Great tribulation and that Christians will suffer for the faith as they bring forth the final witness associated with the 5th seal of the book of Revelation.

Postmillennialism

The **postmillennialist** believes that the millennium is an era (not necessarily a literal thousand years) during which Christ will reign over the earth, not from a literal and earthly throne, but through the gradual increase of the Gospel and its power to change lives. After this gradual Christianization of the world, Christ will return and immediately usher the church into their eternal state after judging the wicked. This is called post-millennialism because, by its view, Christ will return after the millennium.

Amillennialism

Amillennialism (Greek: a- “no” + millennialism) is the view in Christian eschatology which states that Christ is presently reigning through the Church, and that the “1000 years” of Revelation 20:1-6 is a metaphorical reference to the present church age which will culminate in Christ's return. It stands in contrast to premillennialism, which states that Christ will return prior to a literal 1000 year earthly reign; and postmillennialism, which states that Christ's return will follow a 1000 year golden age ushered in by the church.

Preterism

Preterism is a view in Christian eschatology which holds that some or all of the biblical prophecies concerning the Last Days refer to events which took place in the first century after Christ's birth, especially associated with the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 AD. The term preterism comes from the Latin *praeter*, meaning past, since this view deems certain biblical prophecies as past, or already fulfilled.

Preterism is most dramatically contrasted with Futurism, the view that most prophecies regarding the End times, and passages referring to Last Days, Great Tribulation, and Judgment are still future and will immediately precede the return of Christ. Proponents of Preterist views generally fall in one of two categories: Partial Preterism or Full Preterism.

As you can see, there is a wide variety of differing views on eschatology. We believe that is the case because each view begins with **different methods of interpreting prophecy** and has **different assumed contexts** as to what the Bible is about and who it is for.

Conclusion

Regardless of these conflicting views as briefly stated above, we believe eschatology need not be confusing. If we approach the Bible as objectively as possible in order to examine the evidence, based on an agreement of *how* to interpret prophetic passages, we are optimistic that an accurate conclusion can be made about the time frame of the coming of Jesus.

2

Principles for Interpreting Prophecy

In order to accurately arrive at a conclusion of fact based on biblical evidence regarding what the Bible says about the coming of Jesus Christ, there must be agreement on *how* prophecy is to be interpreted. There are certain principles, or rules of the road, that must be understood, accepted, and applied in order to correctly interpret the Bible. If we do that as objectively and consistently as possible, we have a good chance of arriving at a reasoned conclusion.

Two General Principles

Throughout the *Covenant Heritage Series*, we have consistently applied two main principles of interpretation:

1. The Bible is most accurately and safely interpreted in its own context; and
2. The Bible must be allowed to interpret itself.

For example, how shall we know what John 3:16 says and means?

For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life. – John 3:16

We would seek out the answers determined from:

- The immediate context of John chapter 3,
- The larger context of the Gospel of John and the other writings of John, and
- The even larger contexts of both the Old and New Testaments.

We might also ask questions such as:

- What does the word “world” mean and how is it used in the Gospel of John?
- How is “world” used in all the writings of John?
- How is “world” used in the Old and New Testaments?
- Who is the object of God’s love elsewhere in the Bible?

These two principles must be used and applied consistently to draw conclusions of fact. In respect to interpreting prophecy, these two principles are an indispensable combination because both the Old and New Testaments are necessarily **interdependent** on each other. Old Testament (OT) prophecies, referring to the coming of the Lord and the time of the end, find their explanation and fulfillment in the New Testament (NT). **Both contexts** must be considered in light of letting Scripture interpret Scripture.

This means that OT passages can be understood more deeply in the light of the developing revelation of later parts of the OT and especially of the NT. The OT authors had a true understanding of what they wrote but not an exhaustive understanding. This means that a NT text’s contextual understanding of an OT text will involve some essential identity of meaning between the two, but often the meaning is expanded and unfolded, growing out of the earlier meaning.¹

More specially, “our interpretive task is to align the content of OT prophecies with the NT perspective.”² The definitive link between the contexts of the Old and New Testaments is the fact that:

¹ G.K. Beale, *Handbook on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2012), p. 27.

² William Klein, Craig Blomberg and Robert Hubbard, Jr., *Introduction to Biblical Interpretation*, (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, Inc., 1993), revised and updated 2004, p. 376.

... the OT prophets understood that history has two major periods – the present age and the age to come ... Most OT prophecies concern the present age, even those that predict events in the distant future. But introductory phrases like “in the latter days,” “in that day,” or “days are coming” often signal a prophecy about the age to come (e.g., Isa 2:2; 11:10,11; 24:21; Jer 23:5; 31:31; Zech 14:1; etc.).³

So, the important point of applying these two principles of interpretation in respect to prophecy is to remember that “NT teaching associates all prophetic fulfillments with Christ’s first and second coming.”⁴ This is a correct and undisputed perspective.

One Intended Meaning

Fundamental and absolutely necessary to these above stated principles of interpretation, which ***must*** be applied to the Bible or any other book, newspaper article, or everyday conversation, is this:

There is **only one possible meaning of a text** or utterance, and that our goal is to understand the author’s intention in writing that text.⁵

What did the author intend to communicate and what did his audience understand the author to write or speak? What meaning did the author most reasonably intend and his readers most reasonably understand that meaning to be?

Hence that meaning of a sentence which most readily suggests itself to a reader or hearer, is, in general, to be received as the true meaning, and that alone.⁶

Why then are there so many varied and conflicting **opinions** as to what the Bible says and means with respect to the subject matter of the coming of Jesus Christ, or any other doctrine, for that matter? Please let the following two quotations offer an answer:

³ Ibid., p. 376. We need to clarify that “the distant future” is relative to the time when the Old Testament prophecies were given.

⁴ Ibid., p. 377.

⁵ Ibid., p. 6.

⁶ Milton Spencer Terry, *Biblical Hermeneutics*, (New York, NY: Phillips & Hunt, 1883), p. 205.

When we find that in the explanation of certain parts of the Scriptures no two interpreters out of a whole class agree, we have great reason to presume at once that **some fatal error lurks in their principles of interpretation.**⁷

Those who read the Bible only from the perspective of their immediate personal circumstances, who forget that **the passage was originally written to somebody else**, cut short the interpretive process and, thus, miss some of what the text says. They understand the message strictly in terms of the events going on in their own lives and ignore the perspective of the text and its original recipients.⁸

We cannot underestimate the power of this fundamental principle if there is the full intent within the interpreter to accurately determine what the Bible says and means.

One cannot allow personal feelings, current events and culture, not to mention religious dogmatic creeds and traditions, to nullify ***the original context of the original author and audience in history and language.*** We must be ever conscious and ruthlessly strict with the application of this unchanging common sense principle. Thus, we shall be referring to it repeatedly as we examine the evidence of the biblical text and history of that time as we study prophecy.

The Grammatico-Historical Method

How then shall we move forward to fully satisfy the application of this critical principle of interpretation? There is only one approach that will verify the accuracy of the Word of God as to what it says and means: the Grammatico-Historical method. There is perhaps no better summation of this method than from one of the most notable Christian scholars of the nineteenth century to the present, Milton Spenser Terry:

... we may name the Grammatico-Historical as the method which most fully commends itself to the judgment and conscience of Christian scholars. **Its fundamental**

⁷ Ibid., p. 161.

⁸ Klein, Blomberg and Hubbard, Jr., *Introduction to Biblical Interpretation*, p. 7.

principle is to gather from the Scriptures themselves the precise meaning which the writers intended to convey. It applies to the sacred books the same principles, the same grammatical process and exercise of common sense and reason, which we apply to other books. The Grammatico-Historical exegete, furnished with suitable qualifications, intellectual, educational, and moral, will accept the claims of the Bible without prejudice or adverse prepossession, and, with no ambition to prove them true or false, will investigate the language and import of each book with fearless independence. **He will master the language of the writer, the particular dialect which he used, and his peculiar style and manner of expression. He will inquire into the circumstances under which he wrote, the manners and customs of his age, and the purpose or object which he had in view.** He has a right to assume that no sensible author will be knowingly inconsistent with himself, or seek to bewilder and mislead his readers.⁹

That's worth reading again to let it sink in. Knowing the language and history of the times in which the Bible was originally recorded gives us the legitimate context in which to correctly interpret it. And this, of course, is fundamental to interpreting prophecy.

Prophetic Language

Accurately interpreting prophecy also requires that we correctly identify **the kind of language** commonly employed in the Old and New Testaments. We are familiar, of course, with the **historical narratives** about real people, places and events in the Bible. The history of Abraham, Moses or David is well-known in this respect. The language of **poetry** is often displayed in the Psalms. Poetry is characterized by symbolic words and phrases. For example, Psalm 1 illustrates the righteous man as “like a tree firmly planted by streams of water...” (verse 3). He is not literally a tree, but likened to the idea of a tree which presents the picture of security and stability. **Prophetic language** is much like poetry. It is of a symbolic nature.

⁹ Terry, *Biblical Hermeneutics*, p. 173.

Much of the reason prophetic portions of the Bible are grossly misinterpreted is due to the failure of the interpreter to recognize and differentiate between styles of writing and whether the language being used is literal or figurative.

... many errors in prophetic interpretation come from a single mistake based on a plain, “literal” way of reading the text. Many Christians do not consider the wide variety of the styles of language we find in the Bible. ¹⁰

Interpretation of the prophetic portions of the Bible depends on **determining the nature or class of literature** the author is using. Not understanding how the Hebrew prophets wrote in a figurative or symbolic style paves the way for unwarranted speculation about what they meant to convey. For example, we have already discussed the phrase “heaven and earth” in Book Four, *God’s Covenant Creation*. Often, it symbolically referred to Israel in the Old Testament. Yet when that phrase appears in the New Testament, it is commonly **assumed** by many to refer to the physical universe.

This problem exposes a common mistake made in interpreting prophetic language, because we think differently in Western culture than the original writers and their audience. The modern perspective is centered in a material universe.

To the cold prosaic imagination of the West, the glowing and vivid style of the prophets of the East may seem turgid and extravagant; but there is always a substratum of reality underlying the figures and symbols, which, the more they are studied, commend themselves the more to the judgment of the reader. **Social and political revolutions, moral and spiritual changes, are shadowed forth by physical convulsions and catastrophes;** and if these natural phenomena affect the imagination more powerfully still, they are not inappropriate figures when the real importance of the events which they represent is apprehended. The earth convulsed with

¹⁰ Timothy P. Martin and Jeffrey L. Vaughn, *Beyond Creation Science: New Covenant Creation from Genesis to Revelation*, (Whitehall, MT: Apocalyptic Vision Press, 2001), Third Edition 2007, p. 241.

earthquakes, burning mountains cast into the sea, the stars falling like leaves, the heavens on fire, the sun clothed in sackcloth, the moon turned into blood, are images of appalling grandeur, but **they are not necessarily unsuitable representations of great civil commotions – the overturning of thrones and dynasties, the desolations of war, the abolition of ancient systems, and great moral and spiritual revolutions.**¹¹

Prophetic language commonly uses symbolic words and phrases that **appear** as literal “physical convulsions and catastrophes” to **represent** social, cultural and political “commotions ... desolations ... and spiritual revolutions.” That prophetic language uses symbolic imagery is important to remember when interpreting prophecy.

Categories and Examples

There are many categories and examples of figurative language, but we will mention only three main types, each followed by examples from our Western culture and from the Bible. We begin with the metaphor.

A **metaphor** is “a figure of speech which makes an implicit, implied, or hidden comparison between two things that are unrelated but share some common characteristics.”¹² Everyday examples that might be commonly used include:

He has a lot of anger bottled up.

She is the apple of his eye.

He’s just tooting his own horn.

This guy is a loose cannon.

It’s raining cats and dogs.

Biblical examples include:

Let me sing now for my well-beloved a song of my beloved concerning **His vineyard**. My well-beloved had

¹¹ James Stuart Russell, *The Parousia*, (Bradford, PA: Kingdom Publications, 1996), pp. 350-351.

¹² LiteraryDevices.com/metaphor.

a vineyard on a fertile hill. He dug it all around, removed its stones, and planted it with the choicest vine. And He built a tower in the middle of it and also hewed out a wine vat in it; then He expected it to produce good grapes, but it produced only worthless ones. – Isaiah 5:1-2

Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path.
– Psalm 119:105

For You formed my inward parts; You wove me in my mother's womb. I will give thanks to You, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made; wonderful are Your works, and my soul knows it very well. My frame was not hidden from You, when **I was made in secret, and skillfully wrought in the depths of the earth...**
– Psalm 139:13-15

Luke 15:11-32, the parable of The Prodigal Son, is a metaphor in story form.

A **simile** is “a figure of speech that makes a comparison showing similarities between two different things ... with the help of words ‘like’ or ‘as.’”¹³ Some everyday examples are:

He's as strong as an ox.

They're like two peas in a pod.

She's as blind as a bat.

They live like pigs.

He's as tough as nails.

Some biblical examples are:

The king made silver and gold as plentiful in Jerusalem **as stones**, and he made cedars as plentiful **as sycamores** in the lowland. – II Chronicles 1:15

I am poured out **like water**, and all my bones are out of joint; my heart is **like wax**; it is melted within me.
– Psalm 22:14

Israel is swallowed up; they are now among the nations **like a vessel** in which no one delights. – Hosea 8:8

¹³ LiteraryDevices.com/simile.

The peoples will be burned to lime, **like cut thorns which are burned in the fire.** – Isaiah 33:12

He spoke another parable to them, “**The kingdom of heaven is like leaven**, which a woman took and hid in three pecks of flour until it was all leavened.”
– Matthew 13:33

Matthew 20:1-16, the parable of The Laborers in the Vineyard, is a simile in story form.

A **hyperbole** is a figure of speech which involves an exaggeration of ideas for the sake of emphasis.¹⁴ Some everyday examples are:

I’m so hungry I could eat a horse.

I’ve told you a million times to clean up your room.

He’s got tons of money.

She types faster than greased lightning.

Some biblical examples are:

Where can we go up? Our brethren have made our hearts melt, saying, “The people are bigger and taller than we; **the cities are large and fortified to heaven.** And besides, we saw the sons of the Anakim there.”
– Deuteronomy 1:28

Out of all these people 700 choice men were left-handed; **each one could sling a stone at a hair and not miss.** – Judges 20:16

Why do you look at **the speck that is in your brother’s eye**, but do not notice **the log that is in your own eye**? Or how can you say to your brother, “Let me take the speck out of your eye,” and behold, the log is in your own eye? – Matthew 7:3-4

You **blind guides**, who **strain out a gnat and swallow a camel!** – Matthew 23:24

All these types of figurative language are used frequently in prophecy. If they are not correctly discerned, but are taken literally instead of symbolically, it will result in confusion and interpretive error.

¹⁴ LiteraryDevices.com/hyperbole.

For example, consider the prophecy in Isaiah 2:2 concerning “the last days”:

Now it will come about that in the last days the **mountain** of the house of the LORD will be established as the chief of the **mountains**, and will be raised above **the hills**; and all the nations will stream to it. – Isaiah 2:2

“Mountain” and “mountains” are not literal mountains in this prophetic passage. Neither are “the hills” literal hills. These words are symbolic of a kingdom or kingdoms.

In the context of judgment against Pharaoh and Egypt, God spoke through the Prophet Ezekiel:

“And when I extinguish you, I will **cover the heavens** and darken their stars; I will cover the sun with a cloud and **the moon will not give its light**. All the shining lights in the heavens I will darken over you and will set darkness on your land,” declares the Lord GOD.
– Ezekiel 32:7-8

These phrases are only symbolic of God’s judgment on Pharaoh and Egypt. The phrases “cover the heavens” and “the moon will not give its light” obviously miss the point when taken literally.

The Prophet Micah communicated God’s judgment coming on Samaria and Jerusalem (Micah 1:1):

For behold, the LORD is coming forth from His place. He will come down and tread on the high places of the earth. The **mountains will melt** under Him and **the valleys will be split**, like wax before the fire, like water poured down a steep place. – Micah 1:3-4

Did literal “mountains melt” or “the valleys ... split” or is this prophetic language being used to describe God’s judgment on the house of Israel and the house of Judah?

In Isaiah 24:3-4, in the context of God’s judgment against Tyre (see Isaiah 23), the prophet wrote:

The earth will be completely laid waste and completely despoiled, for the LORD has spoken this word. **The earth mourns and withers, the world**

fades and withers, the exalted of the people of the earth fade away. – Isaiah 24:3-4

Did the planet literally fade and wither? No. This is a figurative way of emphasizing a devastating judgment. Likewise in verse 19:

The earth is broken asunder, the earth is split through, the earth is shaken violently. – Isaiah 24:19

The earth was not literally “broken asunder,” “split through,” or “shaken violently.” Again, Isaiah is using hyperbole or an exaggerated way of saying this is going to be a terrible judgment.

The Old Testament prophets constantly used symbolic prophetic language which was not meant to be taken literally. And the prophetic portions of the New Testament, addressing many of the Old Testament prophecies, were using the *same* figurative language.

One last example is the phrase “day of the Lord” used frequently in both the Old and New Testaments. Every context in which it is used is about judgment and victory.¹⁵ This phrase does not refer to a literal day, as we might assume in our Western thought, but is a reference to a time of judgment or victory.

One good rule of thumb (figuratively speaking, of course) to verify that the New Testament is using prophetic or symbolic language is to find out if it was also used in the Old Testament. You will usually find either direct quotes or references to the Old Testament in the New Testament. Otherwise, use common sense to determine if figurative or literal language is being employed.

Conclusion

Correct and accurate interpretation of the prophetic portions of the Bible will dramatically increase if we consistently apply the basics. First, we must keep in mind that **the Bible was not written to us**

¹⁵ Isaiah 11:11; 13:6,9; 27:12; 30:26; Ezekiel 7:19; 13:5; 30:3; Joel 1:15; 2:11,31; Amos 5:18; Obadiah 15; Zephaniah 1:7,14,18; Malachi 4:5; Acts 2:20; I Corinthians 1:8; I Thessalonians 5:2; II Peter 3:10. Sometimes “day of the Lord” is simply referred to as “the day,” or “that day,” “day of God,” “day of the Lord Jesus,” and so forth.

in the twenty-first century or the fifteenth century or the fourth century AD. It was written to and about various people (primarily Israel) in different time periods and circumstances. The New Testament was written to first century Israelites in their historical context. Although we can gain insight and instruction for our time about many different subjects, we must read the text keeping in mind **it was written primarily to them.**

Second, we must remember that prophetic language must be understood from the perspective of what was being communicated in a figurative way. Reading prophetic sections literally instead of figuratively will change the intended meaning and result in all sorts of mistaken notions of what we think the author meant to say. Consequently, we will not see what he was actually saying.

While we cannot over-emphasize the principles and instruction on how to interpret prophecy, the whole message of what Jesus and the Apostles taught about the coming of Jesus Christ will be completely misunderstood unless the **context** of the whole Bible is taken into account and understood. We examine that context in the next chapter.

Summary of the *Covenant Heritage Series*

The *Covenant Heritage Series* is a set of seven books that will help you understand what the Bible says and what it means to you in regard to your heritage. The series examines the current critical issues of our time in light of what the Bible says. Finally, it offers biblical answers for transforming this world system back to God's original plan and purpose.

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