

Lectures on the First and Second Epistles of Peter

by
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Lecture VIII

"Knowing this first, that no prophecy of the Scripture is of any private interpretation. For the prophecy came not in old time by the will of man: but holy men of God spake as they were moved by the Holy Ghost"

(2 Peter 1:20,21)

A glance at the context shows that the 20th verse is intimately related to the 19th. There the writer had commended his brethren for taking heed, and had encouraged them to persevere in taking heed, to the prophetic word, as being confirmatory of the truth of what Apostles had taught them respecting the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, and as having itself been confirmed by what Apostles had already seen and heard of His kingly majesty on the mount of Transfiguration. Here, whatever doubt may rest on the precise meaning of the verse, it certainly seems to specify some consideration that mainly justified their attentive and persistent interest in the study, and at the same time perhaps the consideration was one, the settled conviction and steady remembrance of which was essential to their profiting by that study: "*Knowing this first*," first of all, as what is most important to be known and ever borne in mind, "*that no prophecy of Scripture¹ is of any private interpretation.*" What this really means, however, is far from being obvious. In fact, the passage has long been famous as the cross of commentators.² Let us at least do our best to understand it.

Evidently the great point is to determine the exact import of the phrase "*private interpretation.*" And with regard to this, opinions will be found to arrange themselves in three principal divisions, according as the word *private* is referred to prophecy, the readers of prophecy, or the prophets themselves.

I. According to one very old and still very common opinion, what the text asserts is that *no Scripture prophecy interprets itself*, but needs light from the event or other revelations.³

To this view there are several serious objections. If no prophecy interprets itself, or, in other words, if no prophecy is so expressed as to be apart by itself intelligible, then it is not easy to see how any number of prophecies, themselves all equally indeterminate, could be made by combination to determine the meaning of one another. All prophecy, prior to the fulfilment, must be only useless and bewildering. The "lamp shining in a dark place" could at the best but serve to make the darkness visible. It could penetrate the gloom with no resistless ray, and

1 2 Tim. 3:16 -- the only other text where *γραφή* occurs without the article.

2 Wolf: 'Crucem fixit interpretibus.'

3 So the Syriac, (which also construes *ἰδίας* with *γραφής*,) Horsley, Dietlein, Peile, Brückner, Wordsworth, and many others.

could shed no comfortable light on the pathway of the Church. This interpretation, therefore, sets aside one chief end of prophecy, to wit, the guidance and consolation of the children of God during their earthly pilgrimage, and is irreconcilable with the nature of faith as "the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen,"⁴ and with the experience of the faithful in all ages. Moreover, it contradicts the testimony of Scripture itself respecting some prophecies, as when Paul says that "the Spirit speaketh expressly," that is, distinctly, unambiguously, in regard to the apostasy of the latter times; and the unquestionable fact is, that very many prophecies of Scripture do interpret themselves just as readily and satisfactorily as Micah's one prophecy of the birth of the Messiah in Bethlehem, which we find was perfectly understood by the chief priests and scribes, and that independently of any help either from the event or from other scriptures.⁵ Nor must it be overlooked that, were it even true that every scriptural prophecy is in itself unintelligible, this would scarcely be alleged for the sake of illustrating and enforcing the duty, presented in the 19th verse, of taking heed to it, nor, on the other hand, would that fact itself be at all accounted for by telling us, as in the 21st verse, that prophecy was originally spoken by holy men of God under a Divine inspiration.⁶

II. The second general explanation, and one also quite commonly adopted, is this: *No prophecy of Scripture is subject to the private judgment of each separate reader.*

There is necessary also, says the Romanist, the consent of the Catholic Church. But as, on the one hand, we know that many prophecies have been rightly interpreted by individuals without that consent, as by Noah, Abraham, Daniel, so, on the other hand, there is comparatively but a small proportion of the prophecies on which any such consent can be found to exist. Nor does the 21st verse go to prove that it is required.

The Protestants, again, who adopt this second view say that what is needed to control and fortify private judgment is Divine illumination, or the general sense of Scripture.⁷ And here undoubtedly we have a great principle of safe biblical interpretation. But, besides that the announcement of it as especially applicable to *every prophecy* might seem to be somewhat too absolute, it must also be confessed that the connection between it and what follows remains still indistinct and unsatisfactory.

III. And the same thing may be said of one form of the third view--that which refers the word *private*, not to prophecy as failing to interpret itself, nor yet to the readers of prophecy as unable to interpret it by their own sagacity, but to *the prophets themselves as unable to interpret their own prophecies*.⁸ That these prophecies were divinely inspired is of itself no reason at all for the prophets not being able to understand them; nor, on the other hand, is it likely that the mere fact of the prophets not understanding some or any of their prophecies would be urged as the principal reason for taking heed to them, or as the main thing to be remembered by the student.

There is, however, another way of putting this third reference, that is free from the difficulties

4 Heb. 11:1.

5 1 Tim. 4:1; Matt. 2:5, 6; Mic. 5:2.

6 Comp. p. 194.

7 So many from Bede to Wiesinger, including Luther, Beza, Cocceius, Steiger, etc.

8 So Œcumenius, Knapp, Schleusner, Tilloch, De Wette.

besetting all the other explanations. According to this, the Apostle had no thought whatever about the interpretation of prophecy. He was thinking solely of its origin, and what he says is that *the prophets in prophesying did not of themselves interpret the future, or the hidden counsels of God*. Now, that the verse will bear this construction I have no doubt. Indeed, a strict rendering of it would, I think, be the following: "*Knowing this first, that no prophecy of Scripture cometh of private*"--or *from one's own*--"*interpretation*."⁹ No such prophecy, in other words, is the fruit of the prophet's own conjectures or calculations as to what is going to happen.¹⁰

To this solution of the difficulty I am not aware of any valid objection,¹¹ and it has several points in its favor, that are not met by any other:

1. It satisfies the universal term of the proposition. It is true of every Scripture prophecy, that it did not originate with the prophet.
2. It preserves the proper force of the word which I render *cometh*, and which always does carry with it the idea of *origin, production, result, or change of state*. In other places, accordingly, our translators represent it variously by such expressions as *to be made, to be wrought, to be done, to become, to arise, to come, to come to pass*, etc.¹²
3. The writer having just spoken of the "lamp shining in a dark place," it was very natural that he should at once and earnestly assure us, that that lamp was neither fashioned nor lighted by the prophet himself.
4. Here was a distinct and powerful motive for taking heed to the prophetic word, and one well fitted to produce a patient and reverent and docile spirit of investigation; especially when,
5. In the last place, what we thus suppose to be implied in the negative statement of the 20th

9 *ἰδίας* (translated in our common version seventy-eight times out of ninety-six by *own, his own, her own*, etc., according to the reference) *ἐπιλύσεως* (the emendation *ἐπηλύσεως*, adopted by Grotius, is merely conjectural, having no manuscript authority) *οὐ γίνεται*. -- *Ἐπίλυσις*, found nowhere else in the New Testament, is employed by Aquila for *פְּתָרֹנִים*, Gen. 40:8, (English version *interpretations*), and by Symmachus for *תְּרָפִים*, Hos. 3:4, (*teraphim*--understanding, probably, by the word an oracular response, or the means by which it was obtained. In this case Theodotion has *ἐπιλυόμενος*; and Aquila, the same form at Gen. 41:8.) The etymological idea of *unloosing, setting free* from entanglement, and hence figuratively of *making clear, settling by exposition*, is apparent in the New Testament use of *ἐπιλύω*, Mark 4:34, (E. V. *expounded*); Acts 19:39; and, according to some copies, in the Septuagint Gen. 41:12.

10 Such appears to be the sense of the Vulgate, (*propriâ interpretatione non fit*), and it has been adopted by many later interpreters, including Cameron, Bengel, Huther, Robinson, Alford, Fronmüller, etc.

11 The more common construction, indeed, would have a preposition, as *ἐκ, ἀπό*, with the genitive. But this case is also employed thus simply by itself to express the relation of dependence or origin. See Rom. 9:16; Buttman, §132, 3; Kühner, § 273, I.

12 While the past tenses of *γίνομαι* are often used as corresponding parts of *εἶναι*, this is not true of the present. Here the distinction, as between *feri* and *esse*, is, I believe, strictly maintained, and the neglect of it in some cases by our common version is perhaps always injurious to the sense.

verse is immediately unfolded into the more explicit declarations of the 21st:--"For the prophecy came not in old time by the will of man: but holy men of God spake as they were moved by the Holy Ghost."

This at least must be allowed to be an unequivocal apostolic testimony as to the source of prophecy--of "every prophecy of Scripture"--and by *Scripture* it cannot be questioned that Peter meant chiefly, if not exclusively, the writings of the Old Testament, as they were then known to the Jews, as they had been transferred from the Synagogue to the Church, and as we now have them in our own hands. Here, then, literally rendered, is what Peter affirms respecting the entire mass of ancient and venerable oracles therein contained: "For not by man's will was prophecy"--any prophecy--any thing deserving of the name, and that has ever been so regarded by the people of God--"brought at any time."¹³ It did not begin here. In no single instance was it the product of human speculation. It was "brought"--brought to the prophet as well as to us, nor had a human will, either ours or his, the least agency in that first bringing of it, any more than in the case of the Voice that sounded forth from the excellent Glory at the Transfiguration,¹⁴ or in that of the sun's rays.

As regards prophecy men were simply the instruments employed in delivering it to us--the channels merely of its transmission. They delivered what they received--nothing more--nothing less--and just as they received it. "But," says Peter, in strongest opposition to all idea of a human authorship, "moved"--impelled, borne along, like ships before a breeze--"by the Holy Ghost, spake holy men of God"--or, as some read, "men spake from God,"¹⁵ that is, sent and empowered by God to speak in His behalf, and repeating only what they had heard in His pavilion fresh from His lips, or seen in the light of His presence. The other reading, however, is in this respect no less significant. The prophets were "holy men of God"--holy in their relation to God, as separated and consecrated to a holy function, and used by God in His immediate service. They were also, in at least the great majority of cases, men personally holy, devoted to God's fear, and jealous for His truth and law and honor. But neither their official nor their personal holiness accounts for any one of their prophecies. In prophesying they were, so to speak, possessed, caught up, and carried forward, by the Holy Ghost. Like that Divine chariot which Ezekiel saw by the river of Chebar, "whithersoever the Spirit was to go, they went," and this equally whether at the time they understood their own prophecy or not, and whether in any particular instance they acted with the conscious concurrence of their own faculties or not. In each and every instance it is true of them, and it is all that is essential for us to know, that they "spake" under the impulse and sway of the Heavenly Breath, as the organ sounds only under the hand of its master. They "spake"--they wrote--no more can be said of them than that. What they should speak or write, and how, were matters not within their own control, but determined for them by the Holy Ghost. Of the seventy elders of Israel in the wilderness we read: "And it came to pass that, when the Spirit rested upon them, they prophesied and did not cease." The same thing holds good of all the holy prophets. They were simply the Spirit's spokesmen or amanuenses, and for that reason, like Moses in his relation to Aaron, were

13 οὐ γὰρ θελήματι ἀνθρώπου ἠνέχθη ποτέ (see the English margin; 1 Cor. 9:7; 1 Thess. 2:5, etc.) προφητεία
(Tischendorf, προφ. ποτέ.)

14 Comp. with ἠνέχθη here the ἐνεχθείσης of v. 17.

15 ἀλλ' (Sin. ἀλλά) ὑπὸ Πνεύματος Ἁγίου φερόμενοι (comp. Acts 27:15, 17) ἐλάλησαν ἅγιοι Θεοῦ ἄνθρωποι. For ἅγιοι
Tischendorf reads ἀπό, (B.) Lachmann inserts τοῦ before Θεοῦ, (A.)

"instead of God" to all to whom their word came.¹⁶ Their pure, calm, bright souls--to avail ourselves of an illustration of one of the greatest Fathers of the Church--become as it were mirrors of the Divine energy, reflecting the image without confusion, and unstained by aught of fleshly passion.¹⁷

The great and fundamental lesson, therefore, taught us in these two verses, is the Divine origin of all the prophecies of Scripture. And it is well for us again to remember, what is historically quite certain--nothing more so--that, when Peter and Paul speak of *Scripture*, they mean at least that same Old Testament which at this very day constitutes three fourths of our completed Bible. How familiar Christ and His Apostles were with these old writings, how deeply they revered them, and with what confidence they drew from them, as from an inexhaustible storehouse, arguments and illustrations in defence of the Christian faith, is apparent from every page of the New Testament. And from that one fact you can safely be left to estimate for yourselves at something like its true value the intelligence, to say nothing of the piety or the modesty, of those nowadays who think that they have long since outgrown these swaddling-clothes, as they regard them, of the infant Church. Alas! and what would they have us to substitute in their room? Nothing better than the shifting conceits and baseless prognostications of this world's wisdom, or the frozen dreams of a Swedenborg, or the inflated imbecilities and dismal drivel of our modern spiritualists! For these we are to give up Moses, David, Isaiah, Daniel, and all the other holy names!

The insane wickedness of such a course glares upon us, the moment we recover a firm hold on the principle urged in the text, that here--here and nowhere else--we have "not the word of men, but, as it is in truth, the word of God." The power of that very promise which the Lord gave His Apostles for their special encouragement had already been abundantly experienced by them of old time: "It is not ye that speak, but the Spirit of your Father which speaketh in you." In reading the Bible, therefore--the Old Testament no less than the New--we are ever to bear it on our hearts, that we are listening not so much to holy men speaking for God, as to God Himself speaking through them to us. And can God's word ever grow old? or sink into the feebleness and aimlessness of second childhood? Is it not rather, like Himself, "the same yesterday, and to-day, and for ever"?¹⁸

Nor does any one portion of the Bible carry on its face a brighter signature of Divinity than does "the prophetic word." God Himself glories in it as one of His most incontestable and inalienable prerogatives: "I am God, and there is none else; I am God, and there is none like me, declaring the end from the beginning, and from ancient times the things that are not yet done, saying, My counsel shall stand, and I will do all my pleasure." In the same spirit is His contemptuously indignant challenge to all His base rivals of the heathen idolatry: "Produce your cause, saith the Lord; bring forth your strong reasons, saith the King of Jacob. Let them bring them forth, and show us what shall happen: let them show the former things, what they be, that we may consider them, and know the latter end of them; or declare us things for to come. Show the things that are to come hereafter, that we may know that ye are gods."¹⁹

16 Ezek. 1:20; Ex. 4:16.

17 Basil, *Comm. in Esaiam*, Proœem.

18 1 Thess. 2:13; Matt. 10:20; Heb. 13:8.

19 Is. 46:9, 10; 41:21-23.

Yes, what neither human nor angelic wisdom could do for us has been done through the power and grace of the Holy Ghost. If it be true that His voice no longer falls in audible accents on the ear--if it is not now heard, as in the days of old, speaking in visions to the prophets, or startling the silence of the skies--yet let us continually bless God that its many ancient revelations are not lost. It was for no object of slight or transient interest, that the Eternal did in former times maintain so frequent, and so direct, an intercourse with sinful men. And if the fiery shapes that crowded the top of Sinai, and praised God at the Nativity, have long since disappeared from the paths of our daily life, yet at their departure they left a trail of glory behind them, and the ever-multiplying echoes of their song still resound through the universe. Know ye that in this old book, the Bible, much more generally patronized by us, I fear, than studied, we have the sum of all the communications which Heaven has made to earth. The scattered beams, which ever and anon leaped forth from the great Source of light, are here collected as in a radiant shrine--a flaming cresset--"a lamp shining in a dark place." And of this entire cluster of revelations it must be said generally, that they all bear a prophetic character. "Whatsoever things were written aforetime, were written for our learning, that we through patience and comfort of the Scriptures might have hope."

What serious mind can calmly converse for even a brief period with this wondrous volume, and not feel itself brought under the powers of a yet future world? We stand, so to speak, in the midst of a magnificent temple, made without hands, rich in the most stupendous scenery, and filled with the odors of sweet incense, and with responsive strains of complicated and far-reaching harmonies, but of which the innermost glory is the Throne of God and the Lamb, encircled by the Rainbow of the covenant, adored by the myriads of the redeemed and the outer circles of the angelic hierarchy, and shedding a holy effulgence, that shall never grow dim, into all heights and depths of the new heavens and the new earth, wherein dwelleth righteousness.²⁰

Such, I repeat, is the Bible, and such preëminently is the Bible as God's *prophetic word*. And if Apostles said to their churches, "Ye do well that ye take heed to it," what would they say to those of you who slight it, neglect it, rather dislike to hear about it, care less for it than you do for your novels, and your political speeches, and your daily newspapers? Surely the least that could be said is, *Ye do ill*--ye dishonor God, and ye defraud and abuse your own souls.

Lecture VIII [on 2 Peter] in John Lillie, *Lectures on the First and Second Epistles of Peter* (New York: Charles Scribner & Co., 1869).

²⁰ Rom. 15:4; Heb. 6:5; Rev. 4:3; 2 Pet. 3:13.