

Protestant Biblical Interpretation

A Textbook of Hermeneutics for Conservative Protestants

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CHAPTER X

THE INTERPRETATION OF PROPHECY

A. CONFUSION OF TERMINOLOGY

A study of hermeneutical literature pertaining to prophecy reveals that there is no uniformity of meaning with reference to the terms employed. Progress among evangelical scholars in attempting to settle hermeneutical differences can but be greatly hindered as long as this terminological confusion exists. We must first do some spade work and attempt to clear up the confusion that exists at this point.

First, note the ambiguous character of the word *literal*. In what we shall call Meaning A it refers to grammatical or literal exegesis. The expression "the literal meaning of the passage" means the grammatical exegesis of the passage. But if a man states that he believes in a literal kingdom he means to state something about the nature of the kingdom. He means that he accepts an *actual* kingdom. In Meaning B the word literal then means *actual* in contrast to fictional, or abstract, or ephemeral. There is something else implied in Meaning B, and that is that by actual we mean earthly, visible, concrete.¹ If the word did not have this overtone then the amillennialist could claim to believe in a literal (actual or real) kingdom and do so with propriety. Literal exegesis frequently leads to belief in literal (actual, real) entities but this is not a rigid relationship. We may have a literal exegesis about heavenly or spiritual matters, and conversely, we may have poetic or imaginative descriptions of earthly matters. The great inward world of religion is described by the Psalms in much language capable of literal interpretation, and the millennial kingdom which shall be is set forth by the prophets under many figures of speech, poetic pictures, and ideal visions.

We must then be careful in hermeneutics to note whether a writer is using literal in the sense of Meaning A or Meaning B, and we must further keep in mind that although literal exegesis may lead to belief in the existence of actual entities, nevertheless spiritual matters may be literally exegeted and earthly affairs may be described in figurative and poetic language.

Much more ambiguity surrounds the word *spiritual*. In Meaning A spiritual may mean something about piety, morality, or spirituality. In this sense the premillenarians certainly believe that the kingdom of God is spiritual. They do not think for a minute it is secular. In Meaning B spiritual may refer to a mode of interpretation. The spiritual interpretation of the Old Testament would refer to a

¹ In contemporary philosophical literature *literal* is frequently used to mean "referable to sense data." A concept has a literal meaning when it can be demonstrated that it has sensory rootage or counterparts. Cf. Ayer's *Language, Truth, and Logic* for a repeated use of literal in this sense.

method of discovering another meaning in addition to the literal one. But there are different versions of the spiritual interpretation of the Bible.

Let us call the Catholic method Meaning C. Catholic scholars use the expression "spiritual interpretation" to mean the methods of discovering the deeper meanings of Scripture which go beyond the literal meaning. The spiritual interpretation of the Bible is subdivided by them into the *allegorical* (by which is meant typological interpretation); the *tropological* (the application of the Bible to moral and spiritual life); and the *anagogical* (which deals with the manner in which the Church on earth prefigures the Church in glory).

In Meaning D spiritual interpretation is employed by Protestant scholars to indicate the method of discovering New Testament truth in the Old Testament. It thus means the combined study of prophecy and typology. Meaning D among these scholars corresponds to what Catholic hermeneutics calls allegorical interpretation, incidentally adding to the terminological confusion.

In Meaning E spiritual interpretation means to refine to ideas or principles, or to read into the document extraneous ideas. Examples of this sort of spiritualizing would be such as finding Greek philosophy in Moses, or taking the Tabernacle as a diagram of the soul, or calling Abraham *faith* or Joseph *virtue*. This is the sort of spiritual interpretation carried on among mystics, metaphysical cults, Christian Science, and the like.

A word as ambiguous as *spiritual* must be used with care and with a sense of fair play. For example, it is not unusual to find a strict literalist putting some interpreters in Meaning E to embarrass them whereas in truth they belong to Meaning D.

Further involved in this terminological hodge-podge are the words *mystical*, *allegorical*, and *typological*. Many scholars use the expression mystical interpretation as synonymous with spiritual Meaning D (i.e., the study of the types and prophecies of the Old Testament which refer to the New). Further, these scholars may use the word mystical in one line and allegorical in the next for they consider the terms as equivalent.

To some, allegorical interpretation (Meaning A) refers to the sort of speculation found among many of the Fathers and equivalent to spiritual Meaning E. To others (Meaning B) allegorical interpretation is the same as spiritual Meaning D, and still others (Meaning C) the terms is equivalent to typological exegesis. Here again the expression "allegorical interpretation" must be used with care. For example some ardent literalists accuse their fellow exegetes as being allegorists with the definite slurring implication of following Meaning A, whereas these exegetes may actually state in print that they renounce Meaning A² and follow Meaning B.

Finally, in *typological* interpretation we have two meanings. Meaning A refers to what is specifically denoted as the study of types, and Meaning B denotes the general prophetic and typological interpretation of the Old Testament is equivalent to spiritual Meaning D.

We may summarize our discussion as follows:

2 We shall illustrate this later.

Literal Meaning A -- grammatical exegesis.

Literal Meaning B -- the assertion that the words used have actual or real or earthly referents.

Spiritual Meaning A -- piety, spirituality, religious.

Spiritual Meaning B -- any meaning of a document beyond the literal meaning.

Spiritual Meaning C -- Catholic division of the spiritual meaning of Scripture into allegorical, tropological, and anagogical.

Spiritual Meaning D -- the prophetic and typological interpretation of the Old Testament finding in the Old the New Testament realities.

Spiritual Meaning E -- either thinning meanings out to ideas or principles, or the importation of strange and foreign meanings to a passage.

Mystical Meaning -- generally equivalent to spiritual Meaning D.

Allegorical Meaning A -- importation of strange meanings to Scripture equivalent to spiritual Meaning E.

Allegorical Meaning B -- equivalent to Spiritual Meaning D.

Allegorical Meaning C -- equivalent to tropological exegesis.

Typological Meaning A -- typology in strict sense.

Typological Meaning B -- equivalent to spiritual Meaning D.

Much misunderstanding and misrepresentation among evangelical interpreters would be eliminated if some sort of code of well-defined meanings of words could be followed, but until then the terminological confusion will continue to abet the hermeneutical differences.

The issue among evangelical interpreters is not over the general validity of grammatical or literal exegesis. For most of the didactic parts of the Old Testament and practically the complete New Testament, there is agreement that we follow the grammatical method. In fundamental theory there is no difference between Berkhof's *Principles of Biblical Hermeneutics* (amillennial) and Chafer's *The Science of Biblical Hermeneutics* (dispensational). Both agree that the grammatical, historical method is basic to understanding the Bible.

Nor is the issue one of the figurative or non-figurative language of the prophets. The literalist in prophetic interpretation admits the presence of poetic and figurative elements, and the amillennialists who think they deny this are wrong. Some amillennialists think that the figurative and poetic elements weaken the case of the literalists, but their difference from the literalist at this point is not as great as they imagine.

If we may provisionally define the spiritual as the non-literal method of the exegesis of the Old Testament, we may further state that the issue is not between a completely literal or a completely spiritual system of interpretation. Amillennial writers admit that many prophecies have been literally fulfilled, and literalists admit a spiritual element to Old Testament interpretation when they find a moral application in a passage, when they find a typical meaning, or when they find a deeper meaning (such as finding Satan and his career in Isaiah 14 and Ezekiel 28 with reference to the kings of Babylon and Tyre). Nobody is a strict literalist or a complete spiritualist.

Further, some Old Testament passages present *idealized* pictures. For example, in Zechariah 14 Jerusalem is exalted to the top of a mountain, the surrounding mountainous country is made a plain, and two great rivers pour out of Jerusalem, one going east and the other west. A strict literal interpretation of this passage fails to catch the spirit and vision of it. And indeed a very strict literalism would also call for a recreation of iron age culture and iron age peoples of that ancient world. One way of escape from this return to the iron age is to insist that the items mentioned are real, but they will appear in their modern counterparts at the time of the millennium. Prophecies involving horses or chariots or camels are dealing with *transportation*; prophecies speaking of spears and shields are about *armaments*; and prophecies about surrounding nations are about *God's enemies*. A strict literalism would hardly be appropriate in such matters and Davidson says that to call for the complete restoration of all these ancient peoples on the basis of strict literal interpretation "*may not unjustly be called the insanity of literalism.*"³

The real issue in prophetic interpretation among evangelicals is this: *can prophetic literature be interpreted by the general method of grammatical exegesis, or is some special principle necessary?*

B. PRINCIPLES FOR THE INTERPRETATION OF PROPHECY

There can be no question that Girdlestone's judgment that "there is no royal road to the scientific study of prophecy" is correct.⁴ Many royal roads have been advocated but none has been so obvious as to compel the total assent of interested scholars. We have not lacked for advocates of various royal roads and this has led to the hopeless division of evangelical Christianity in prophetic and eschatological matters.

There are two reasons why there is no royal road to prophetic interpretation (and thereby accounting for such wide divergences of prophetic interpretation). First, the prophetic language itself partakes of a measure of ambiguity. It is visionary in that it is speaking of the future and painting it in word pictures. We are not in the position in most instances to compare the picture painted by the prophet and the fulfilment of it. If we could the ambiguity of the passage would drop away, but in that we cannot it remains. The richness of the Christological elements in Psalm 22 and Isaiah 53 are noticed by Christians because they read these passages in the light of the historical existence of Jesus Christ. We should not be surprised if these passages are puzzling to Jewish scholars who do not share this insight. If the language of prophecy were unambiguous the differences among interpreters could be assigned to the superior intelligence of one group and the inferior intelligence of another. But the source of this ambiguity is not in the interpreters but in the visionary character of a record which is speaking of future historical events.

The second reason why interpreters differ so widely is the extent of the prophetic Scriptures. The prophetic material of Scripture is to be found from Genesis to Revelation. To assemble each passage, to thoroughly digest its meaning, to arrange the passages in a prophetic harmony, would involve a prodigious memory, years of exacting work, a masterful knowledge of Biblical languages, an exhaustive reading of prophetic literature, a keen exegetical sense, a thorough knowledge of the histories of many peoples and a knowledge of all relevant archaeological materials. And yet some

3 Davidson, *Old Testament Prophecy*, p. 476. Italics are ours.

4 *The Grammar of Prophecy*, p. 104.

claim that prophetic Scripture is as easy to interpret as the prose passages of the New Testament! With such a great body of Scripture to keep in focus all at once, with its inherent complexity and with the requisite learning to interpret it, it is not surprising that there is such a variety of schools of prophetic interpretation.

(1). *Fundamentals in the interpretation of any passage of prophetic Scripture.* Regardless of our millennial views (the *crux interpretum* of prophetic interpretation) certain principles must be followed by all exegetes of the prophetic Word.

(i) We must, to begin with, *give careful attention to the language of the prophetic passage.* We must determine the meaning and significance of all proper names, events, references to geography, references to customs, references to material culture, references to flora and fauna, and references to climate.

A proper noun whose meaning or significance is not known stands enigmatical in the text. For example, in Hosea 11 these nouns occur: Israel, Egypt, Ephraim, Assyrian, Admah, Zeboim; and in Isaiah 21 we find: Elam, Media, Babylon, Dumah, Seir, Arabia, Dedanim, and Kedar. We must not presume we know the meaning of a term because it is familiar. The word Arabia, by way of illustration, is used in Scripture to indicate different territories than the word signifies to us. The meaning of proper nouns may be ascertained by referring to Bible dictionaries, Bible encyclopedias, or commentaries.

In Daniel 11 numerous historical events are referred to and no interpretation of this chapter is adequate which is not familiar with the necessary historical information. Joel mentions the locust, canker-worm and the caterpillar, and the careful interpreter will acquaint himself with requisite information about these matters of natural life. A knowledge of the history of Jerusalem and Edom is necessary to properly interpret Obadiah 10-14, and we need to understand some of the geography of Jerusalem's environs to understand the reference to the *crossway* (v. 14).

With further regard to the language of a prophetic passage the interpreter should note the *figurative*, *poetic*, and *symbolic* elements. We do not debate here the issue between the amillennialists (who claim dispensationalists underplay the significance of the figurative elements in prophecy) and the dispensationalists. We refer to matters which *all* interpreters must recognize. Figures of speech recur repeatedly in the prophets and the Psalms. Certainly much of the prophetic literature is poetic, and none can deny the numerous symbolic passages in Daniel, Ezekiel, and Zechariah. It was a convinced premillennialist who wrote:

That which makes the language of prophecy so vivid and yet so difficult is that it is always more or less figurative. It is poetry rather than prose. It abounds in peculiar words and expressions which are not usually to be found in prose writings of the same date. It is rich with allusions to contemporary life and to past history, some of which are decidedly obscure. The actions recorded in it are sometimes symbolical, sometimes typical. The present, the past, and the future, the declaratory and the predictive, are all combined and fused into one. The course of individuals, the rise and fall of nations, the prospects of the world at large, are all rapidly portrayed in realistic language.⁵

5 Girdlestone, *op. cit.*, p. 48.

Girdlestone buttresses this by making a Scriptural study showing the different meanings of such terms as: earth, earthquake, sea and river, sand, stars of heaven, the darkening of the sun and moon, and the falling of stars. Sometimes the prophets use these terms literally and sometimes figuratively. Whether the usage in a given passage is literal or figurative must be a matter of careful attention.

Further, as Girdlestone⁶ explains, *much of the prophetic description of the future is in the language of past, historical events*. The new creation is the analogue of original creation; the blessedness to come is in terms of paradise past; future judgment is likened to the flood of the past; destructive judgment finds its type in the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah; great deliverance is paralleled after the deliverance of the exodus. Girdlestone notes that besides past events being used as forms for future events, past persons and past natural events are used as forms for future persons and future events.

The strict literalist would *ex hypothesi* have to call for not only the restitution of Israel, but all the nations which surrounded Israel. The going is rough, no doubt, and one of the ways out suggested by Girdlestone is to make these ancient enemies representative of Israel's future enemies.

(ii). *We must determine the historical background of the prophet and the prophecy*. This establishes the universe of discourse in which the prophet writes. Much of Isaiah is illuminated by a knowledge of the political maneuvers in Israel and among the surrounding nations. A knowledge of the captivities is indispensable for the interpretation of Jeremiah and Ezekiel. To understand Obadiah the history of Edom must be studied and to know Jonah properly a history of Syria must be examined. The so-called automobile prophecy of Nahum 2:4 is not defensible because a study of the prophecy and its historical background reveals that the prophecy alluded to has been fulfilled in ancient times.

Habakkuk 1:5 ff. has been interpreted as a dispersion of the Jews ("behold ye among the nations"), yet if the historical situation is carefully recovered it will be discovered that no such interpretation is possible. The prophet is complaining of the sin and evil unpunished in Israel. God tells the prophet that the wicked will be punished. He invites the prophet to look among the nations. What the prophet beholds among the nations is not Israel in dispersion, but the *avenger* of the ungodly in Israel--the Chaldeans ("For, lo, I raise up the Chaldeans"). The one thing which Israel could not bring himself to believe was that God would ever use a Gentile nation for his punishment. Yet God did precisely this very thing, and so it parallels that day when God shall save the Gentile to the bewilderment of Israel (Acts 13:37 ff.).

If all the examples were given to prove the importance of a thorough study of the prophet's background, almost the entire body of prophetic literature would have to be cited. The importance of this principle cannot be underestimated especially when it is a frequent charge that premillennialism too easily passes by historical considerations.⁷

A further observation is that although history is necessary to understand the prophet, and that some historical event occasioned the giving of the prophecy, prophecy is not to be limited by purely historical considerations. Radical criticism has tried to eviscerate the supernatural character of

6 *Ibid.*, Chapter IX.

7 Cf. the strong words against premillennialism with reference to this spoken by Berry (*Premillennialism and Old Testament Prediction*, p. 8).

prophecy by means of historical interpretation.⁸

(iii). Although it is a principle of general hermeneutics it needs to be reemphasized here that *diligent attention must be paid to the context and flow of the discussion in the interpretation of prophecy*. Chapter and verse divisions are man-made and frequently arbitrary and misleading. The interpreter will look beyond these divisions and discover the natural divisions and connections of the Scripture. For example, to understand Malachi 3:1 properly the interpreter must go back at least to 2:17 to pick up the proper context, and the context necessary to understand Malachi 4 is deep in chapter. 3.

(iv). *The interpreter must be mindful of the nonsystematic character of prophetic writings*. The prophets were preachers and visionaries and not academic lecturers. Prophetic writings are not organized like lecture notes but bear a peculiar impress. The prophets are not systematic in their presentation of sequences. The future may appear present, or nearby, or indefinitely remote. Widely separated events on the actual calendar of history may appear together in the prophetic sequence. The Jewish scholars unable to decipher pictures of Messianic suffering and Messianic glory were not properly prepared for the advent of humiliation of our Lord. Only in the pages of the New Testament are these two pictures properly related in terms of *two* advents of the Messiah (cf. 1 Peter 1:10-12 and Hebrews 9:28).

(v). *Every interpreter of prophetic Scripture should search the entire body of prophetic Scripture to find what passages parallel each other*. Such concepts as the day of the Lord, the remnant, the shaking of the nations, the outpouring of the Spirit, the regathering of Israel, and the millennial blessings occur repeatedly in the prophetic writings. Similar images and symbols also occur. All of this must be reckoned with carefully and intelligently in the interpretation of prophecy.

(2). *The interpreter must determine the distinct essence of the passage of prophetic Scripture*. The essence or genius of a passage means its very nature, its innermost characteristic.

(i). The interpreter must determine whether the passage is *predictive* or *didactic*. Not all prophecy is foretelling the future. It is necessary to determine whether the passage is predictive or if it deals with moral, ethical, or theological truth. The opening verses of Zechariah (1:1-6) are didactic but the following vision is prophetic (1:7-21). Most of Zechariah 7 is didactic but the preceding and following materials are prophetic.

(ii). The interpreter must determine whether the passage is *conditional* or *unconditional*.⁹ The Scriptures may or may not state if the passage is conditional.¹⁰ The great promises of a Saviour and his salvation are certainly unconditional. On the other hand it is not difficult to suggest some conditional prophecies (Jer. 18:8, 10 and 26:12-13 and 3:12. Jonah 3:4. Ezekiel 33:13-15 and 18:30-32). Another class of passages is that which sets forth two possible destinies of which only one can be realized, such

8 A good statement in this regard is made by Wace (*Prophecy: Jewish and Christian*, p. 144 ff.). Fairbairn said that "History is the *occasion* of prophecy, but not its *measure*." (*Prophecy*, p. 40, italics are his.)

9 An excellent treatment of the subject is Girdlestone's (*op. cit.*, chapter IV).

10 "A prophet may set down a prophecy in his book without indicating whether it was fulfilled or set aside." Sutcliffe, "Prophetic Literature," *A Catholic Commentary on the Holy Scripture*, p. 536. Cf. also Girdlestone, *op. cit.*, p. 25, and Fairbairn, *op. cit.*, Chapter IV.

as the curses and blessings of Deuteronomy 28.

The statement of Girdlestone is a remarkably strong one: "It is probable that hundreds of prophecies, which look absolute as we read them were not fulfilled in their completeness because the words of warning from the prophet produced some result, even though slight and temporary, on the hearts of the hearers. God does not quench the smoking flax."¹¹

(iii). If the passage is prophetic determine further if it is *fulfilled* or *unfulfilled*. A prophecy that is conditional and unfulfilled is at the end of the line, so to speak. The interpreter must search the New Testament to see whether the passage is cited there as fulfilled. If the passage is cited in the New Testament then a careful study must be made of both the Old and New Testament passages. It may turn out that the prophecy was made in the Old Testament and fulfilled in Old Testament times such as the prophecy of Genesis 15 fulfilled in the latter chapters of Genesis and the book of Exodus, or the captivity-restoration prophecies of Isaiah and Jeremiah as fulfilled in the books of Daniel, Ezra and Nehemiah.

This problem pushes us to the next major consideration, namely, (3) *the problem of fulfilment in prophecy*. If the prophecy is fulfilled (i) then a study of the text with the historical materials which contains the fulfilment must be made. Most students will not have such materials available and must rely on good commentaries to supply it. From a study of fulfilled prophecy we gain some valuable insights. We have already noted that in the prophetic language things which are widely separated in time appear close together, and that orders of events are somewhat obscure. Fulfilment of prophecy brings these matters to the surface. But most important is that the fulfilled prophecies indicate how careful we must proceed from the prophecy to its *manner* of fulfilment. Sometimes the prophecy is very obviously fulfilled as was the case with Elijah's prediction of a drought (I Kings 17:1) or his prediction of Ahab's death (I Kings 21:17 ff.). Other times the prophecy is very cryptic (e.g., Gen. 3:15) or symbolic (Zech. 5:5-11). Interpreters should be cautious in the interpretations proposed for unfulfilled prophecy, for these examples demonstrate that in some instances little can be gained about the manner of fulfilment from the prophecy itself.

(ii). If the prophecy is *unfulfilled* we must take the lesson gleaned from the previous point--proceed with caution. The essence of the prophecy must be ascertained. Is it about Israel? or Judah? or the Messiah? or the inter-Biblical events?

Determine whether the prophecy is expected to be fulfilled before or after the advent of Christ. Some of the restoration prophecies certainly refer to the return of the Jewish people from Babylon and not to some future period. If the prophecy is pre-Christian, then pre-Christian history must be searched for materials of its fulfilment. If it is apparently to be fulfilled after the first Advent of Christ then we must proceed on considerations we shall subsequently discuss.

Determine what is local, temporal, cultural in the prophecy and what is its fundamental idea awaiting fulfilment. Not every detail of Psalm 22 is about the Messiah, and some scholars have asserted that not all the particulars of Isaiah 53 are about Christ. In the famous prophecy of 2 Samuel 7 where Christ is prefigured in terms of Solomon, the expression "if he commit iniquity" cannot refer to Christ. In Isaiah 7:14-15 Christ is immediately in the foreground, but verse 16 ("for before the child shall know how to

11 *Op. cit.*, p. 28.

refuse evil, and choose the good, the land that thou abhorrest will be forsaken of both her kings") is a local reference. In Psalm 16 David's sweet meditation does not become Messianic until verse 8.

(iii). There is the possibility of *multiple fulfilment*. There is a difference between "multiple sense" and "multiple fulfilment."¹² Misunderstanding has arisen due to the failure to distinguish double sense from double fulfilment. Beecher speaks of *generic prophecy* which he defines as "one which regards an event as occurring in a series of parts separated by intervals, and expresses itself in language that may apply indifferently to the nearest part, or to the remoter parts, or to the whole--in other words a prediction which, in applying to the whole of a complex of event, also applies to some of the parts."¹³ To be sure, Beecher affirms, if the Scriptures had many meanings interpretation would be equivocal, but manifold fulfilment of a generic prophecy preserves the one sense of Scripture. Both promises and threats work themselves out over a period of time and therefore may pass through several fulfilments. Or one may view the same event from more than one perspective. The destruction of Jerusalem is prophesied by our Lord and through it we have a perspective through which to envision the end of the world.

Johnson has an extended discussion of *double reference*. Double reference is characteristic of all great literature, and the Bible being great literature contains it. Hence deeply buried in the events, persons, and words of the Old Testament are references to events, persons, and words of the New Testament. An Old Testament prophecy may find a fulfilment in a pre-Christian event and later in the Christian period, such as the astonishment of the Jews (Habakkuk 1:5-6), which was fulfilled in the Old Testament with the destructive armies of the Chaldeans and in the New Testament with the salvation of the Gentiles.

The presupposition, and a valid one certainly, that the Old is profoundly typical of the New intrudes itself all the way through Johnson's excellent discussion. This is somewhat similar to what Catholics call *compenetration*.¹⁴ In an Old Testament passage the near meaning and the remote meaning for the New Testament so *compenetrate* that the passage at the same time and in the same words refers to the near and the remote New Testament meaning.

(3). The interpreter should take *the literal meaning of a prophetic passage as his limiting or controlling guide*. How else can he proceed? This is the footing for the interpretation of any passage of Scripture. Davidson makes this point with great force, and although he later adds a qualification he insists that prophetic interpretation commence with literal interpretation. To the Jew, Zion meant Zion and Canaan Canaan. "This I consider the first principle in prophetic interpretation," writes Davidson, "to assume that the literal meaning is *his* meaning--that he is moving among realities, not symbols, among concrete things like people, not among abstractions like *our* Church, world, etc."¹⁵ Davidson treats with a measure of scorn those interpreters who blithely make Zion or Jerusalem the Church, and the Canaanite the enemy of the Church, and the land the promises to the Church, etc., as if the prophet

12 Cf. Beecher, *The Prophets and the Promises*, p. 129 ff., and Johnson, *The Quotations of the New Testament from the Old*, p. 197 and 231 ff.

13 Beecher, *op. cit.*, p. 130.

14 Sutcliffe, *op. cit.*, p. 537.

15 *Old Testament Prophecy*, p. 168. Italics are his.

moved in a world of symbols and abstractions.¹⁶

But Davidson is just as much opposed to a forced literalism. He objects to the millennial restitution of the Old Testament worship system, and to press for the restoration of Israel's ancient enemies is the insanity of literalism.¹⁷

The balance in prophetic interpretation is not easy to attain. The strict literalist attempts to embarrass the "spiritualizer" by asking him how he stops spiritualizing once he starts. Bales puts the shoe on the other foot and asks how the literalist stops "literalizing" once he gets started (i.e., the literalist does not plow through all figures of speech and symbols with a mechanical, literal exegesis). Further, Bales argues, in that the literalist also accepts Biblical symbolism and typology he must state how he limits his symbolic and typological interpretation. If the literalist states that it is the nature of the passage with the attendant considerations which tells him when to stop "literalizing" or to limit symbolic and typological interpretation, then Bales replies these are the considerations which guide the spiritualizer.¹⁸

If one maintained a strict literalism he would require that David sit on the millennial throne and not Christ, yet most literalists would say at this point that David is a type of Christ. However, in so doing, his literalism is modulated and all we are arguing at this point is that literalism requires a measure of modulation.

The measure to which literal interpretation is to be followed in Old Testament interpretation is directly related to the problem of the restoration of Israel. Davidson lists four opinions in this regard: (i) those who assert that God's dealings in Christianity are completely personal so a restored national Israel is unthinkable; (ii) those who believe in Israel's conversion but not restoration; (iii) those who believe in a conversion and restoration but with no special prominence for Israel; and (iv) those who believe in a conversion of Israel, a restoration of Israel, and the millennial preeminence of Israel.¹⁹ Mention should be made too of the almost dramatic record that we have of Fairbairn. As a young man he defended the conversion and restoration of national Israel with great ability and persuasiveness; and then as a mature scholar he takes a non-chiliasm view of the problem and denies the restoration of Israel.²⁰

16 Cf., "Certainly the extreme anti-literal interpretation which considers the names Zion, Jerusalem, Israel, and the like to be mere names for the Christian Church, without reference to the people of Israel, does no justice either to the spirit of the Old Testament and its principle, or to the principles on which the apostle reasons." *Ibid.*, p. 490. The essay of Neale and Littledale (*A Commentary on the Psalms*, Vol. I, Dissertation III, "On the Mystical and Literal Interpretation of Scripture, pp. 426-470) is a perfect illustration of this sort of exegesis Davidson refers to, and also constitutes a very stout defense of the traditional mystical system of interpretation. For a more recent defense of mystical interpretation see Darwell Stone, "The Mystical Interpretation of the Old Testament," *A New Commentary on Holy Scripture*, pp. 688-697.

17 Insufficient attention has been payed to the *idealized pictures* in the Old Testament which are not properly interpreted either by a strict literalism or a vapid spiritualizing.

18 Bales, *New Testament Interpretations of Old Testament Prophecies of the Kingdom*, p. 21.

19 *Op. cit.*, Chapter XXIV, "The Restoration of the Jews."

20 These two essays are contained in one volume with their story entitled *Fairbairn versus Fairbairn*.

In general, the premillennialists concur with Girdlestone when he says, that "Israel has a great future is clear from Scripture as a whole. There is a large unfulfilled element in the Old Testament which demands it, unless we spiritualize it away or relinquish it as Oriental hyperbole."²¹ A literal interpretation calls for the fulfillment of many Old Testament passages in a future millennial age.

The premillenarians are not all in one camp, being divided into the dispensational premillenarians and the non-dispensational premillenarians. The former are insistent that the promises made to Israel be fulfilled in Israel; and the latter build their doctrine of the millennium on the progression of the kingdom of God through several stages including an earthly, glorious manifestation as the prelude to eternity. They would approve a measure of sentiment in the words of Frost:

We are a generation of Christians who have learned the dangers of 'liberal protestantism' [whose entire eschatology was that we die and go to heaven]. What he [the liberal protestant] is to make of this world--both literally and figuratively--he does not know. In this situation, I venture to suggest that perhaps millenarianism which also finds a place in Revelation, was too readily scorned by the Alexandrians and evaded by Augustine. There are values attaching--in so sacramental and incarnational religion as Christianity--to the material and the temporal which must be conserved for the Age to come; it may be that a return to the entire eschatology of the Bible, that is, the eschatological 'form' which we have called the 'double-eschaton,' would provide a means whereby the preservation of those values could be presented to our minds.²²

Hermeneutically the premillenarians are then divided between the strict and the moderate literalists.

The postmillenarians are convinced of the spread of the Christian Church by the power of the Spirit until it brings the millennial conditions upon the earth. Some postmillenarians accept the conversion of Israel and some do not. Among those who accept the conversion of Israel some accept the national restoration and some do not. But a measure of literalism pervades postmillennial hermeneutics. To be sure some of the promises made to Israel are transferred to the Church and thereby postmillennialists cross with the dispensationalists, but yet the promises are interpreted as fulfilled here on the earth.²³

The amillenarians believe that the prophecies made to Israel are fulfilled in the church. If these prophecies are so fulfilled no millennium on earth is necessary. The hermeneutical method of the amillenarians (by which they accomplish this claim) is variously called allegorical, mystical, or spiritual.

It must be strongly reiterated here that amillenarians are just as strong in rejecting baseless allegorical speculations as are the ardent literalists. Wyngaarden rejects it as the work of man. Acceptable "spiritualization" is the interpretation of a passage in which the interpreter finds a broadened or

21 *Op. cit.*, p. 138.

22 *Old Testament Apocalyptic*, p. 246. Note also Quistorp's sharp criticism against Calvin because Calvin failed to understand the eschatological character of the millennium of Rev. 20, and did not therefore fit it into the necessary events by which time is ended and eternity commenced. *Calvin's Doctrine of the Last Things*, pp. 161-162.

23 To equate the postmillennialism of godly, devout, Bible-believing men with the kingdom speculations of religious liberalism is (to say the very least) tragic and lamentable.

figurative or typical meaning *given to it by the Holy Spirit*.²⁴ To accuse the amillenarians of being allegorists and implying that their allegorizations are of the same species as that of Philo or Origen is simply not being accurate with or fair to the amillenarians. In speaking of the hermeneutics of amillennialism Chafer wrote: "In sheer fantastical imagination this method surpasses Russellism, Eddyism, and Seventh Day Adventism since the plain, grammatical meaning of the language is abandoned, and simple terms are diverted in their course and end in anything the interpreter wishes."²⁵

Equally contestable is the frequent allegation that the amillenarians are Romish. This allegation must be made with a weather eye to the counter-charge. Are there not millennial cults? Millerism? Seventh Day Adventism? Millennial Dawnism? British Israelism? If similarity of the millennial doctrine of premillennialism with some millennial cults does not constitute a refutation of premillennialism, neither does similarity with Catholic doctrine refute amillennialism. It is true that Augustine marks a definite shift in eschatological thought. Augustine (and Calvin after him)²⁶ made the kingdom of God the spiritual rule of Christ in the church. It was, however, a subsequent development which identified the visible Roman Catholic Church with the kingdom of God. The Romish doctrine is that the visible Catholic Church is the kingdom of God. This to our knowledge was not the claim of Augustine.²⁷

However, it is also to be most certainly noted that it is not unusual for the amillenarians to misrepresent both dispensationalism and premillennialism. Feinberg has caught them with their foot considerably off base at more than one point.²⁸

If it be granted that the literal interpretation is the point of departure for prophetic interpretation, the question to be asked is: *does the Old Testament prophetic Scripture admit of any additional principle besides the strict, literal principle?* Such a principle would of necessity exclude the sort of exegesis characteristic of Philo, Patristic allegorizing and Christian Science spiritualizing. It must also exclude that sort of fanciful typological exegesis which can find New Testament truth in the Old Testament anywhere it wishes. Is there, then, an *expanded typological principle* employed in Old Testament prophetic exegesis? The answer to this must be that there is.

(i). The conviction of the early Church was that the Old Testament was a Christian book. It recognized its inspiration no doubt. But a sheer appeal to the inspiration of the Old Testament without the profound conviction that it was a Christian book would not have made its case. The heresy of

24 Wyngaarden, *The Future of the Kingdom in Prophecy and Fulfilment*, pp. 85-86. This could be extensively documented in hermeneutical literature.

25 *Systematic Theology*, IV, 281-282. A similar comment with reference to postmillennialism is made by Blackstone: "Why! the same process of *spiritualizing* away the literal sense of these plain texts of Scripture will sap the foundation of every Christian doctrine and leave us to drift into absolute infidelity, or the vagaries of Swedenborgianism." *Jesus is Coming*, p. 22.

26 Calvin calls Ezekiel's temple "the spiritual kingdom of Christ" (*Institutes*, IV, 20, 13). The same term is used in IV, 20, 12. He also speaks of the "spiritual and internal reign of Christ" (IV, 20, 21).

27 Robertson, *Regnum Dei*, Lectures V and VI.

28 Feinberg, *Premillennialism or Amillennialism?* This material will be found in the appendix to the second edition which is really a treatise in itself containing a rebuttal of the amillennial and anti-dispensational literature which appeared since his first edition.

Marcion--that the Old Testament was not a Christian book--has been vigorously contested in the Christian Church wherever and whenever it has appeared and in whatever form it has appeared. The entire Patristic period is uniform in the testimony that the Old Testament belongs to the Church because it is a Christian book.

There is absolutely no doubt that this conviction stemmed from the manner in which our Lord and his apostles used the Old Testament. Our Lord said that the Old Testament was his witness (John 5:39), and that he fulfilled it (Matt. 5:17, Luke 4:21). Paul found Christ in many places in the Old Testament; he found justification by faith; he found moral instruction for Christians. The Christian Church has concurred with Vischer's verdict that "The Christian Church stands and falls with the recognition of the unity of the two Testaments."²⁹ Without too much sense of guidance, and without too much understanding of principles of hermeneutics, the Fathers found Christianity and its doctrines in the Old Testament by improper methods. But regardless of their hermeneutical ineptitude we must recognize their inspiration, namely, *that they were seeking the Christian faith in what they deemed to be a Christian book*. In short, an expanded typological interpretation (to distinguish it from typology proper) was characteristic of the interpretations of the Old Testament by our Lord, by his apostles, and by the early Church although in the latter it suffered from malpractice.

Such typological exegesis (as previously defined) is no return to Philonian or Alexandrian exegesis, nor can it by one hair's breadth go beyond the implicit and explicit teaching of the New Testament. For example, it would be very improper on the basis of this principle to state that Aaron is a type of the pope because he was the chief of the priests (as the Catholic interpreters insist), because not a line from the New Testament can be found to support it and the entire tenor of New Testament typology is against such an identification. Further, we must agree with Davidson that a thin spiritualizing of the Old Testament with no proper recognition of the literal meaning of the passages is not to be permitted. And we must further agree with Davidson when he argues that "any hermeneutic which goes so far as to eliminate from the prophecies of the Old Testament which refer to the New Testament times, *the natural race of Abraham, seems to go against the methods of interpretation applied by the apostles.*"³⁰

(ii). Again we must agree with Davidson that the coming of Jesus Christ gives us a new perspective for interpreting the Old Testament. The Old Testament was given in a specific *dispensational* form and if Old Testament truth carries over into the New Testament some of the dispensational form must be dropped as it most certainly is in typology proper. That is to say, the fulfilment of the prophecy is not to be expected to be in the exact form of the prophecy. The amillennialist makes the greatest divorce between the form and the fulfilment of prophecy and that is why the more literal-minded postmillenarians and premillenarians are restive with it. The dispensationalists judge that the distinction between the form and the idea of prophecy is spurious, and therefore they look for the fulfilment of prophecy to be very similar to the precise form in which it was given in the Old Testament.

Davidson's point is that with the advent of Christ *some change in the form of fulfilment* must be expected. With Davidson's strong insistence on the primacy of the literal meaning of the Scripture this does not at all prejudice the case for amillennialism, although it does prejudice the case against an extreme and indefensible literalism.

29 *The Witness of the Old Testament to Christ*, I, 27 (E.T.).

30 *Op. cit.*, p. 477. Italics are ours.

(iii). Contemporary scholars like Hebert and Vischer are advocating a return to a typological (Vischer) or mystical interpretation (Hebert) as the only means of counter-attacking the prophetic negativism use of the grammatico-historical method of exegesis in the hands of the religious liberals. In a very real sense radical criticism was a return of Marcionism, and an unusually narrow use of the grammatical principle in Old Testament exegesis spelled the death of any predictive element in it. This exegetical negativism is to be escaped by a return to an expanded typological exegesis (although Vischer has been accused of being too free in his use of it).³¹ Again the inspiration for a return to the typological exegesis of the Old Testament is the firm belief that in some significant sense the *Old Testament is a Christian book*.

We have now come to the issue which can be delayed no longer: *what hermeneutical method does the New Testament use in employing the Old?* Certainly this should be decisive if it could be unequivocally settled. This does not mean that we cannot garner some hermeneutical insights by a study of the Old Testament. The literal fulfilment of some of the prophecies within the Old Testament period indicates the validity of that principle, and Wyngaarden has pointed out a measure of typological interpretation within the Old Testament itself of such terms as Zion, Israel, and Jerusalem (to mention a few). But if the New Testament contains an inspired interpretation of the Old Testament then we ought to be able to settle the basic issue at least. Wace properly writes that "no interpretation of prophecy can be compatible with the claims of the Christian faith which is not in harmony with that of our Lord, and of the Evangelists and Apostles."³² How does the New Testament use the Old?

(i) Sometimes it is cited to *prove* a point (John 6:45) or a doctrine (Mat. 22:32, 43-44). (ii) Sometimes it is cited to *explain* a point such as bringing out the fearsomeness of Mt. Sinai (Hebrews 12:20). (iii) Sometimes it is cited to *illustrate* some New Testament truth (Rom. 10:18) or to illustrate forcibly by using the language of the Old Testament when some other thought is intended. (iv) Sometimes it is cited as being *literally fulfilled* in the New Testament as with our Lord's birth in Bethlehem (Mat. 2:5-6). Sometimes the New Testament cites the Old Testament *in an expanded typological sense*.

First, the New Testament contains typological interpretations of the Old Testament with reference to its moral teachings and spiritual teachings. The evidence of 1 Cor. 10:6, 11 and Rom. 15:4 is simply incontrovertible at this point. Whenever we draw out an ethical principle, a spiritual rule, or a devotional from the Old Testament which is not a matter of its literal expression we have made a typological interpretation. No doubt all caution and hermeneutical care is to be followed in such

31 Cf. Vischer, *op. cit.*, I, Chapter I; and Hebert, *The Throne of David* ("Clearly, in this general sense the mystical interpretation of the Old Testament is for Christians a matter of obligation." P. 256). Hebert's mystical interpretation is similar to Vischer's typological, and Hebert makes it clear he is advocating no return to previous excesses of this method. Ludwig Koehler has brought four major criticisms against the revived typological exegesis of Vischer ("Christus im Alten und im Neuen Testament," *Theologische Zeitschrift*, 4:253, July-August, 1953). (i) Vischer robs the Old Testament of its own individuality by making its function exclusively that of a pointer to the New; (ii) all the promises within the Old Testament for its own time period have no meaning to Vischer until related to the New; (iii) his typological exegesis is too much an appeal to the understanding and not enough to the heart and conscience; (iv) and he judges interpretations by their effectiveness not their truthfulness.

32 *Prophecy: Jewish and Christian*, p. 131.

instances, but much of the use of the Old Testament in the preaching and teaching ministry would be lost if we denied this use of the Old Testament.

Second, the New Testament contains typological interpretations of the theological elements in the Old Testament. This is the province primarily of typology proper but its extended usage cannot be denied. Creation is a type of new creation in Christ (2 Cor. 4:6), as it is of the complete salvation in Christ (Hebrews 4:4). Further, all that has been said previously of *multiple fulfilment* (and compenetration) applies here. Multiple fulfilment is possible only if a much deeper and pervasive typical element is recognized in the Old Testament than typology proper.

Third, the Greek word *epouranios* ("heavenly") is approximately equivalent to typological. The earthly calling of the Hebrew people is typical of the heavenly calling of the Christian (Hebrews 3:1), and the earthly blessing of Israel is typical of the heavenly gift in Christianity (Hebrews 6:4), and the earthly land of Palestine is typical of the heavenly country of Christian promise (Hebrews 11:6), and the earthly Jerusalem of the coming heavenly Jerusalem (Hebrews 12:22). The typical character of much of the Old Testament economy therefore cannot be denied.

Fourth, the deep-seated typical character of the Old Testament economy (and thereby requiring typological exegesis) is noted in those instances where Israel and the Church are spoken of interchangeably. Paul's use of the Israel of God in Galatians 6:16 bears this out. What avails in Christ, Paul argues, is the cross and the new creation, not circumcision. Upon those who walk according to *this rule* (that which counts is the cross and the new creation in Christ) Paul invokes a blessing. Then he adds: "and upon the Israel of God." If this expression meant the Jewish people, or even Jewish Christians he would be directly contradicting himself. The true people of God are not the Judaizers who wish to circumcize their converts, but those who glory in the cross and are new creations in Christ. Further, the peace and mercy invoked in this passage *on the basis of this rule* is invoked upon those who walk according to it (and as the parallel Greek construction demands) upon the Israel of God. It is inescapable that the *Israel of God* means the true people of God (in contrast to the Judaizers) who glory in the cross and count the new birth as that saving act of God and not circumcision.

In Hebrews 8:8 the new covenant is made with the house of Israel and Judah. The strict literalists insist that this means Israel and Judah and not the Church, for if it meant the Church we would have an unequivocal instance in which Israel is spoken to when the Church is meant and the essential distinction between Israel and the Church would be obliterated. The following is to be noted: (i) The New Covenant is one of the several items discussed in Hebrews all of which are now realized in the Church and the present age. That Christ is our Moses, our Aaron, our Sacrifice the strict literalists readily admit. To isolate the New Covenant and forward it to the millennium is to disrupt the entire structure of Hebrews. (ii) The writer of Hebrews applies the New Covenant to Christian experience in Hebrews 10:15-17. Bales makes a sharp but accurate observation here. If the New Covenant belongs to Israel alone and that during the millennium, then the writer of Hebrews has erred in applying it to present Christian experience.³³ To say that we are under the benefits of the Covenant without actually being under the covenant is to clandestinely admit what is boldly denied. (iii) The multiplication of covenants becomes confusing. When our Lord initiated the Lord's Table he mentioned the new covenant. Dispensationalists observe the Lord's Table and must so admit that some new covenant is now in effect, but deny that the New Covenant of the Lord's Table is the same as the New Covenant of

33 *Op. cit.*, pp. 110-111.

Hebrews 8. We thus have two new covenants. (iv) The terms of the New Covenant are distinctly Christian and that is why they are applied to Christians in Hebrews 10. Yet to strict literalists the millennial age is an age of the restitution of the law.³⁴ But the very wording of the New Covenant is so clear at this point. It is declared that it will not be like the Covenant made at Mount Sinai (Hebrews 8:9).

Fifth, the context of the passage associates the mediatorial office of Christ with the New Covenant. Christ is the *mediator* of a new covenant and this is speaking of his *present work as mediator*. If his mediatorship is *present*, the covenant which he founded and upon which his mediatorship is based is *present*. To remove the covenant from its present operation is thereby to remove the grounds of the mediatorship of Christ. Strict literalists who would push the New Covenant on to the millennium have not calculated properly with the implications of such an interpretation upon Hebrews 8:6.

In short, the only consistency in Hebrews is to admit either that *all* items refer to the Jews during the millennium or that *all* pertain to the Christian dispensation. But no interpreter would dare remove the precious truths of Hebrews *en toto* from the Christian Church and make them valid only for the millennium. We are compelled to believe that the New Covenant spoken of in Jeremiah spoke of Israel and Judah as typical of the New Testament people.

Finally, we have some examples of typological exegesis in Paul's use of the Old Testament. Physical circumcision is typical of spiritual purification (Col. 2:11, Rom. 2:29, Phil. 3:3, and Eph. 2:11). The care given the treading oxen of the Old Testament is typical of the care to be given the servants of Christ (1 Cor. 9:9). The veil covering the face of Moses is typical of the spiritual darkness of present unbelieving Israel (2 Cor. 3:13-16). The law written on tablets of stone is typical of the gospel written on the human heart (2 Cor. 3:1). The darkness and light of creation are typical of the darkness of human sin and the truth of the gospel in illumination (2 Cor. 4:6). The passover lamb is typical of the saving death of Christ (1 Cor. 5:7).

Supplementary to this is similar treatment of the Old Testament in the closing chapter of Hebrews. The altar of the Old Testament is typical of the cross of Christ (13:10-12). The burning of the sacrifice without the camp is typical of the rejection of Christ, and so we too ought to go without the boundaries of "official religion" and fellowship with the sufferings of Jesus (13:13). The city of Jerusalem is typical of the city to come (13:14). The Old Testament sacrifices are typical of the spiritual sacrifices of Christians (13:15).

As Girdlestone put it, "Israel is thus a representative or typical nation, in its origin, its history, its bondage, and its deliverance. Its story is prophetic, inasmuch as it is the key to the philosophy of all history. It is also provisional and there is an anticipation running through it which is fulfilled in Christ."³⁵

An extreme literalism or an extreme typological approach is equally contrary to the method by which the New Testament interprets the Old. But just as the ellipses of the planets have two foci while the sun

34 The Sermon on the Mount is called the constitution of the millennial kingdom (*Scofield Reference Bible*, p. 999) and is labeled as *pure law* (p. 1000). So much so that even the petition for forgiveness of sins in the Lord's Prayer is called *legal ground* (p. 1002).

35 *Op. cit.*, p. 85.

is only at one of them, so there must be a controlling principle between the typological and the literal interpretation of prophecy. One must be the point of departure, and in keeping with the system of hermeneutics proposed earlier in this volume we make the literal the control over the typological. Therefore, *interpret prophecy literally unless the implicit or explicit teaching of the New Testament suggests typological interpretation.*

Obviously this does not immediately settle the millennial question, the *crux interpretum* of Old Testament prophetic interpretation, and it is not the function of hermeneutics as a science that it should. A particular belief is the product of an applied hermeneutical theory. However, the position here stated favors a millennial interpretation of the kingdom of God.

In some passages of Old Testament prophecy it is difficult to determine whether the deliverance spoken of refers to the return from the Babylonian captivity or to millennial deliverance. Further, passages of great salvation and joy usually referred to the millennium could refer to the future state in glory. Further, the *raison d'être* of the millennium must most assuredly be (as John Gill so forcibly points out in his great *Body of Divinity*) the manifestation of the glory of Christ.

(4). *The centrality of Jesus Christ must be kept in mind in all prophetic interpretation.* Millennialism degenerates into cultism whenever prophetic interpretation ceases to be dominantly Christological. Some premillennialism has been branded as excessively Jewish and perhaps those premillennialists are misunderstood because they have failed to be sufficiently Christological in their interpretation. Girdlestone's advice can be well taken in this connection: "To study the prophets without reference to Christ seems as unscientific as to study the body without reference to the head. The Spirit of Christ was in the Prophets all the way through (1 Pet. 1:11), and each book is to be read as part of a great whole."³⁶ The Roman Catholic exegetes have erred at this point, finding far too much Catholicism in the Old Testament rather than Jesus Christ.

The finest statement of the Christological principle in Old Testament interpretation is that of Francis Roberts who lived in the seventeenth century:

Now that we may more successfully and clearly understand Scripture by Scripture, these ensuing particulars are to be observed: (I) *That Jesus Christ is our mediator and the salvation of sinners by Him is the very substance, marrow, soul and scope of the whole Scriptures.* What are the whole Scriptures, but as it were the spiritual swaddling clothes of the Holy child Jesus. (1) Christ is the truth and substance of all types and shadows. (2) Christ is the matter and substance of the Covenant of Grace under all administrations thereof; under the Old Testament Christ is *veyled*, under the New Covenant *revealed*. (3) Christ is the centre and meetingplace of all the promises, for in him all the promises of God are yea, and they are Amen. (4) Christ is the thing signified, sealed, and exhibited in all the sacraments of the Old and New Testaments, whether ordinary or extraordinary. (5) Scripture genealogies are to lead us on to the true line of Christ. (6) Scripture chronologies are to discover to us the times and seasons of Christ. (7) Scripture laws are our schoolmaster to bring us to Christ; the moral by correcting, the ceremonial by directing. And (8) Scripture gospel is Christ's *light*, whereby we know him; Christ's voice whereby we hear and follow him; Christ's cords of love, whereby we

36 *Ibid.*, p. 107.

are drawn into sweet union and communion with him; yea, it is the power of God unto salvation unto all them that believe in Christ Jesus. Keep therefore still Jesus Christ in your eye, in the perusal of the Scripture, as the end, scope, and substance thereof. For as the sun gives light to all the heavenly bodies, so Jesus Christ the sun of righteousness gives light to all the Holy Scriptures.³⁷

The *apocalypse* is one of the modes of prophetic communication. Religious liberalism and radical critics have had some very harsh things to say about the Biblical apocalypses but recent scholarship has more properly assessed them and taken a far more wholesome attitude toward them.³⁸ Apocalyptic language is *prophetic, historical, and symbolic*. The rules are easy; the interpretation difficult. (1) In interpreting apocalyptic literature all that has been said of the rules and praxis for general interpretation applies at this point. (2) In the interpretation of apocalyptic imagery a complete literalistic method is impossible. Those who claim to be complete literalists with reference to Revelation cannot consistently follow their program out. The issue is not between spiritualization and literalism but between lesser and greater degrees of spiritualization. To be thoroughly literal we would have to insist that a literal (actual) woman sat literally upon seven literal hills! that Jesus Christ has a literal sword coming out of his mouth! and that beasts can act and talk like men! To be literalistic in interpreting Revelation really means that the symbols of Revelation pertain to real, visible occurrences here on earth in contrast to some sort of gradual or historical fulfilment of the symbols in a thinner form. (3) Every effort must be made to discover whether the symbol had any meaning in the culture of the writer. This demands a very careful and exacting historical research by the exegete. (4) The passage in which the apocalyptic symbol appears must be carefully examined to see whether the meaning of the symbol is there revealed. (5) An examination must be made of history if the apocalypse is fulfilled in history. Fortunately, with reference to much of Daniel and Zechariah this is possible. (6) With reference to New Testament books, inter-Biblical apocryphal literature must be examined to see whether it contributed any of the symbols. (7) With special reference to the book of Revelation the Old Testament must be searched thoroughly for every possible clue to the symbols there used.³⁹

37 *Clavis Bibliorum* (1675), p. 10, cited by Briggs, *Biblical Study*, p. 363. Italics are his.

38 Cf. H. H. Rowley, "The Voice of God in Apocalyptic," *Interpretation*, 2:403-429, October, 1948; E. F. Scott, "The Natural Language of Religion," *Interpretation*, 2:420-429, October, 1948; Raymond Calkins, "Militant Message," *Interpretation*, 2:430-443, October, 1948; and Charles T. Fritsch, "The Message of Apocalyptic for Today," *Theology Today*, 10:357-366, October, 1953.

39 Once again it must be said that if the student works with the genuinely scholarly works, commentaries and other reference works, he will find much of these details already settled. A comprehensive survey of all the type of apocalyptic symbols used in the book of Revelation will be found in J. P. Lange, *Revelation* (E. R. Craven, American editor), pp. 1-41. Another substantial list of apocalyptic symbols is in *The Holy Bible Commentary*, IV (New Testament), pp. 468-86. A sensible set of rules for interpreting Revelation, which could be applied to all apocalyptic literature is in Henry Cowles, *The Revelation of John*, p. 39 ff. Terry, *Biblical Hermeneutics*, gives two chapters to the interpretation of apocalypsis, but merely for illustration. He says that "the hermeneutical principles to be observed in the interpretation of apocalypsis are, in the main, the same as those which we apply to all predictive prophecy," p. 340. There is no rule of thumb method to unlock the mysteries and perplexities of apocalyptic imagery. Hermeneutics is an art and a science, and the specific interpretations of the interpreter reveal to what degree he is an artist and scientist.

C. THE MEANING OF 2 PETER 1:20

This verse of Scripture has been given three major interpretations. The first is that the Catholics use it to prove that the church, not the individual, is to interpret the Bible. Some Protestants use it to prove that no prophetic passage is to be interpreted in isolation from other passages. And the third, and that which appears to be the correct one, is that it has nothing to do with prophetic interpretation at all, but with the divine origin of prophecy.

The theme that Peter is discussing is the divine origin and nature of prophecy. He is talking about the sure word of prophecy, that it is well for all of us to reckon with, for it is a shining light in a dark place. Having said this, he then tells us that the reason for these remarks is that the prophetic utterances come not from man but from the Holy Spirit. Thus the *context* has nothing to do with the interpretation of prophecy, but its inspiration, and verse 20 should be so interpreted.

In justification of this is the most evident parallelism of thought between verses 20 and 21. (a) *Private inspiration* of verse 20 is apposite to the *will of man* in verse 21. (b) The *origination* of prophecy is denied to man in verse 20, but affirmed of the Holy Ghost in verse 21. (c) Personal, private, self-inspiration of verse 20 stands opposite to the holy men of God in verse 21.

Moreover, a careful study of the Greek text of verse 20 seems to bear the interpretation we give it. The King James Version translates the Greek *ginetai* very weakly with an "is." If it were translated more accurately, it would have been rendered *came*, or *came into existence*, anticipating the *were moved* of verse 21. The word translated by *interpretation* is not the customary word for such but is from the verb meaning "to loose." There is a sense in which *to loose* means to interpret, in that the meaning of a passage is explained releasing its sense, and it is so used in Mark 4:34. Rendering the expression painfully literally, it would read "private unloosing." That is, no Scriptural prophecy originated through personal, individual inspiration (loosing or releasing) but by the unloosing, releasing, or inspiration of the Holy Spirit.

Robertson⁴⁰ translates *epiluseos* as *disclosure*. As such it makes the verse speak of inspiration, not of interpretation. In his *Word Pictures in loco*, he says: "It is the prophet's grasp of the prophecy, not that of the readers that is here presented, as the next verse shows."⁴¹ Fronmüller, in Lange's *Commentary*, says: "The reference is to the origin, not to the interpretation of the prophecy, as is evident from v. 21."⁴² The American editor of the same cites Alford and Bengel as agreeing with this view. Williams, in the *American Commentary on the New Testament*, shows how the Catholics take the usual interpretation of this verse much to their own advantage and then says: ". . . but the best view seems to be this: 'That no prophecy of the Scripture is a matter of one's own explanation'--that is, the prophets do not originate their own prophecies; they receive them entire from above as is clear from the fact given in the next verse. Peter, therefore, must be understood as saying nothing whatever relative to interpreting the Scriptures."⁴³

40 *A Grammar of the Greek New Testament in the Light of Historical Research* (fifth edition), p. 514.

41 Vol. VI, p. 159.

42 Vol. IX (second German edition), p. 21.

43 *Peter*, vol. VII, p. 91.

Alford gives quite an extended note in his *Greek Testament* substantiating the interpretation we are defending. Others interpreting the verse this way are Huther in Meyer's *Commentary*, and Lumby in *The Holy Bible Commentary*. Fairbairn also takes this to be the meaning of the passage and brings out the same point we have about *ginetai*.⁴⁴ However, Bigg⁴⁵ makes *ginetai* simply equivalent to "is," and says that the text does not state who the authoritative interpreters are. Bigg says the important question is: what is the opposite of private interpretation? It can only be that (a) no prophetic passage can be interpreted by itself since all prophecy is by the same author and must be therefore correlated, or (b) that there must be a "public" authority to interpret Scripture. But Peter is not talking of possibilities of misinterpreting Scripture, but of the divine origin of prophecy and its usefulness to the Christian.

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44 P. Fairbairn, *Prophecy*, p. 497.

45 C. Bigg, *The Epistles of St. Peter and St. Jude* (The International Critical Commentary), p. 269 ff. Bigg does not even mention this alternative interpretation suggested here and defended by a number of scholars.