

Lesson 3

THE HERMENEUTICS OF PROPHECY

Hermeneutics is the Biblical science of the basic laws of the interpretation of the scripture. Hermeneutics deals with “how” a person interprets scripture not “what” he concludes. The “how”, of course, will directly affect the “what” of interpretation.

GENERAL RULES OF HERMENEUTICS

Interpret Grammatically: A study of the basic meaning of a word, for a word is a vehicle of thought.

Interpret According to Context: A word study must be placed into the context of a sentence, a sentence into the context of a paragraph and a paragraph into the context of a chapter and a chapter into the context of a book. The purpose of the writing, the people addressed and the general theme of the book are all important factors to take into consideration in interpretation of scripture.

Compare Scripture with Scripture: The writing of one author should be compared with the writing of the same author in another book of scripture, and then compared with the scripture of other authors.

Interpret Unclear Passages by Clear Passages: It is best not to build a doctrine on an unclear passage; rather the clear passages should be used to throw light on the unclear passages.

THE ISSUE IN THE HERMENEUTICS OF PROPHECY

The real issue between amils and premils is over hermeneutics. How does one interpret prophecy? Does he interpret Old Testament prophecy literally or does he interpret it spiritually as all fulfilled in the church age? The question is whether one interprets the New Testament by the Old Testament or the Old Testament by the New Testament, recognizing progressive revelation (revelation in stages as that the New Testament is higher and clearer revelation than the Old Testament.).

Premils claim that they use one method of hermeneutics for the interpretation of both the Old Testament and New Testament. They use the grammatic-historical method, which is the literal method. They admit that the Bible at times has many symbols and much figurative language; yet, they claim that all symbols and figurative language connotes a literal meaning. In actuality, premils use a seemingly more literal approach to prophecy. Dispensationalists and historic premils disagree over the degree of literalness that should be used in the interpretation of prophecy.

Amils claim that the Bible is its own interpreter of prophecy and that the New Testament spiritualizes Old Testament prophecy and applies it to the church age or the gospel age. All the promises made to Israel in the Old Testament are fulfilled in the church because the church is spiritual Israel. Except in a few places such as the time, extent and nature of an earthly kingdom, postmils agree with amils in their basic interpretation.

PREMILLENNIAL HERMENEUTICS

Interpret Literally Whenever Possible: The same rule of interpretation should be used for prophecy as for all other scripture. This makes the Old Testament basic for an interpretation of the New Testament. For instance, the Old Testament speaks of a worldwide future kingdom on earth (Num. 14:21; Isa. 40:5; 49:6; Psa. 86:9; 22;27; Isa. 2:2-3), the reign of Messiah on His earthly throne (2 Sam. 7:12-16; Psa. 89:3-4, 34-36; Jer. 23:5-8; 33:20-26; Ezk. 34:23-25; 37:23-24; Mic. 4:7-8). Israel will be converted (Jer. 31:31-34; Ezk. 11:18-20, Rom. 11:26-29).

Dispensationalists and most historic premils believe that Israel will be returned to the land (Isa. 10:21-22; Ezk. 34:24,30,31; Zech. 13:9; Mal. 3:16-18). A Premil says these prophecies must find literal fulfillment or God's word and promises are weak or not kept. God's very character is at stake. These promises will find fulfillment in a yet future earthly millennium.

A premil attempts to explain most everything in his system even if some things do not fit logically into his system. It is better to stay with a literal interpretation and have some apparent contradictions than to spiritualize Old Testament scripture.

Law of Fulfillment: In the interpretation of unfulfilled prophecy, fulfilled prophecy forms the pattern. Hundreds of prophecies concerning Christ's first advent were fulfilled literally. Why not, then, a fulfillment literally of prophecies surrounding the Lord's second advent?

Amils and premils all agree that Zech. 9:9 was fulfilled literally in Christ's first advent. Amils would say that Zech. 14:16,17 must be taken figuratively and applied generally to the future blessing of the church. However, premils say this must be taken quite literally and refer to a future earthly kingdom. Amils agree that Christ is coming again (Zech. 14:1-3) but this language is figurative (Zech. 14:4,5). Can we divide a literal second coming from a literal placing of His feet on the Mount of Olives? Premils say "no!"

Give Figurative Language a Literal Meaning: The Old Testament abounds in figurative language in the area of prophecy, but all figurative or symbolic language conveys a literal truth.

Compare Prophecy with Prophecy: Each prophecy should be checked with other prophecies for all prophecy is part of God's overall plan.

Law of Time Relationship: Two future events may be so closely mingled together on the horizon of prophecy as to appear like mountains in a range of mountains, the valleys being hidden. Two prophetic events placed side by side do not necessarily have to happen simultaneously or even in immediate succession (Isa. 9:6-8; 61:1-2).

Law of Double Reference: While not all premils hold to this law (cf. J. Barton Payne, *Encyclopedia of Biblical Prophecy*, p. 121ff), it is generally held that a prophecy may have a double fulfillment, one being in the immediate circumstances and another in the distant future.

There are many references in the Psalms that speak immediately of a situation particular to David but have a future fulfillment in the person of Jesus Christ (Psa. 41:9; John 13:18).

Perhaps Babylon is a good illustration of the law of double references. The rise and fall of Babylon has a near and a far view because the near view was never completely fulfilled (Isa. 13:19-22; Jer. 50:3a, 13 cf. Jer. 31:13 with Rev. 17:1; Jer. 51:7 with Rev. 17:4, etc.).

AMILLENNIAL HERMENEUTICS

The Old Testament Must be Interpreted by the New Testament

Augustine coined the phrase, "The Old is by the New revealed; the New is in the Old concealed." This has been an Amil hermeneutical principle since Augustine and before. An amil believes that what Christ taught by His Holy Spirit through the Apostles is final, authoritative and infallible. The key to prophecy is how the Apostle's interpreted Old Testament scripture. The Apostles do spiritualize the Old Testament and give a progressive revelation to Old Testament revelation. For example, the Old Testament speaks of a highway for preparation for the King of Israel (Isa. 40:3) and speaks of Elijah the prophet coming before the Day of the LORD (Mal. 4:5), but the New Testament says that Elijah is John the Baptist (Matt. 11:12-14; 17:16; Mark 9:11-13).

The premil answers the question of Elijah and John the Baptist by stating that John the Baptist denied he was Elijah (John 1:21) and Luke 1:17 says that John the Baptist came in the "power and spirit" of Elijah. It is also a Jewish custom to liken one person to another if there are certain characteristics we wish to emphasize, much like we say, "He is a Daniel."

The Old Testament Is Typical and the New Testament Is the Fulfillment of the Type

The Old Testament types foreshadowed the reality of the Gospel Age in the New Testament. The whole of the Old Testament, not just the ceremonial aspects of the Mosaic Law, pointed forward to Christ and the Gospel Age (Heb. 10:1 cf.; Heb. 3:5; Col. 2:17).

1. The “seed” of the Abrahamic Covenant was Christ (Gal. 3:16).
2. Christians are spiritual seed of Christ and heirs of the Abrahamic Covenant (Gal. 3:29).
3. The church is spiritual Israel (Gal. 6:16).
4. The church is spiritually circumcised in the heart (Phil. 3:3; Rom. 2:29).
5. The tabernacle of the Old Testament. is spiritually fulfilled in the church (Acts 15: 14-18) and the church is a holy temple (Eph. 2:21-22; 1 Cor. 6:19,20).
6. Christ does sit upon His throne (Acts 2:32, 34-35) and does have a universal spiritual reign in the hearts of men (John 18:36 cf. Luke 17:21).
7. The Land of Canaan is spiritually realized in “a better country”, the heavenly Jerusalem (Heb. 11:10, 16).
8. Jerusalem is really the New Jerusalem (Gal. 4:26). The real Mount Zion and the real Jerusalem are heavenly (Heb. 12:22).

The Old Covenant Has Passed Away

The Old Covenant (Mosaic economy) was temporary and everything connected with it has vanished away and is never to be restored (Heb. 8:13). The New Covenant replaces the Old Covenant; therefore, Christianity transcends, supercedes and fulfills Judaism (Gal. 3:19; Heb. 9: 6-10).

When Christ finally came, the dispensation of Law (Moses or the Old Covenant) had fulfilled its function in history. The blood of animals, feast days, the Jewish temple, Jerusalem and the “holy land” had fulfilled their functions and any return to those things now is a denial of the reality brought to us by Jesus Christ.

Divine revelation is progressive. “But the path of the just is as a shining light, that shineth more and more unto the perfect day” (Prov. 4:18). There is no going back, but always a going forward to something more glorious. There will never be a restoration of the “divers washings,” “carnal ordinances” beggarly elements,” and “worldly sanctuary,” with its sacrifices and Levitical Priesthood, and the “middle wall of partition” between Jew and Gentile (Heb. 9:1-10; Gal. 4:9; Eph. 2:14). That has gone and gone forever; those who assert otherwise preach a revived Judaism and ancient Rabbinism and not the message of the New Testament. (G.B. Fletcher, *Predictive Prophecy*, “Seven Principles of Interpretation”)

The Symbolic Must Be Interpreted by the Didactic

We should not try to build a theory on passages that are written in a symbolical context. Doctrinal positions, even in prophecy must be by straightforward teaching (didactic) passages. For instance, many passages on the second coming of Christ are not clear, but a very clear passage is 2 Peter 3:1-14. The context is about the second advent of Christ and there is a chronological time sequence: Christ will come suddenly and unexpectedly (v. 10), the present earth will be destroyed by fire (vs. 10, 12) and then will come the “new heavens and new earth” or the eternal state (v. 13).

CONCLUSION

It seems as though a safe basic principle in the hermeneutics of prophecy would be: take every passage literally unless there is some compelling reason to take it otherwise. This compelling reason will normally be a plain didactic passage in the New Testament

We should keep control over our hermeneutical system by letting the literal control the typological. Therefore, we should interpret prophecy literally unless the implicit or explicit teaching of the New Testament suggests typological (spiritual) interpretation.