

Robert Vannoy, Foundations of Biblical Prophecy, Lecture 13a,

IX, Hermeneutical principles for interpretation of prophetic writings

A. 1. Hermeneutical Principles for Interpreting Prophetic Writings

Last week we were beginning our discussion of Roman numeral IX., “Hermeneutical principles for interpretation of prophetic writings.” We had discussed A. 1. which is: “The purpose of predictive prophecy.” I think that’s important not only for the time in which the prophets proclaimed the message but for us as well. Prophecy is not simply meant to satisfy the appetite that almost everyone has for learning about what’s going to happen in the future. It is something that’s given in the context of God’s purposeful movement in history ultimately pointing to the period of consummation when Christ returns and how that is to affect how we live today; that is the primary thing.

2. Predictive prophecy and history writing

Number 2. is “Predictive prophecy and history writing.” I think there are two common but erroneous ideas about the nature of the relationship between predictive prophecy and history writing, and I’m speaking there of predictive prophecy and history writing as genres of literature. Those erroneous views arise because the distinction in literary form between prophetic discourse and historical discourse is not often discerned. Some people look at predictive prophecy as a captivating form of historical writing and this is the usual view of the critical school of thought that doesn’t really accept that there is such a thing as genuine predictive prophecy but rather see it as a captivating form of historical writing that was produced subsequent to the events that it describes. In other words, it’s history written after the event.

a. Prophecy’s Not History: More Enigmatic Character

If you look in your citations page 21, Mickelsen in his volume on *Interpreting the Bible* speaks about this and says, “but prophecy is not history written after the event. Ordinary historical writing in the Bible lacks the enigmatic character of prophecy. It is

characterized by a treatment of the details and their subordination to basic events in some type of chronological pattern. This is in contrast to the prophetic narratives which deal with future realities. These realities are set forth as important particulars but subordinate details are not presented in developed time sequences or consistent trains of thought. Any man who could write history in the form of Hebrew prophecy would have to forget half of what he knew in order to give the appearance of being a prophet. But the artificiality of such a tactic would surely show through.”

I think what Mickelsen is getting at is if you compare biblical historical discourse and prophetic discourse you will find an enigmatic character in prophecy. In historical discourse you have all these details that are put together in an ordered synchronous kind of way. In prophecy you don't get all the details, you get a few of them. But you don't get enough to get the whole picture, and there's that difference between prophetic discourse and historical discourse. You see the point Mickelsen is making is the character of prophetic discourse is different from the character of historical discourse. There's a certain enigmatic character to it. All the details are not there. So it's not history written after the event, as he says somebody would have to forget half of what he knew in order to write history in the form of predictive prophecy.

b. Predictive Prophecy is History Written Beforehand

So that's one rather common erroneous idea that's out there, but another one is that predictive prophecy is history written beforehand. Now what I mean by that is not that I'm challenging the legitimacy of predictive prophecy as actually speaking of what is to happen in the future, but we're looking at the character of discourse. Prophetic discourse does not normally give as complete a picture of an event as historical discourse does. In historical discourse you have all the particulars and in prophetic discourse you do not; instead you get that enigmatic character. That enigmatic character does not negate the recognizability of fulfillment. When it comes to pass there's enough there that when what is spoken about in advance happens it can be recognized. You have enough information to see fulfillment when it happens. However, and here is a caution,

fulfillment may come in ways not completely foreseen or anticipated. In other words, when the fulfillment comes there may be some twists and turns and characteristics of it that are surprising.

c. Example Isaiah 9 and Matthew 4

Let me give you just one illustration: if you look at Isaiah 9 and then Matthew 4. In the first verses of Isaiah chapter 9, you read, “Nevertheless there will be no more gloom for those who were in distress; in the past he humbled the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali but in the future he will honor Galilee of the Gentiles by the way of the sea along the Jordan. The people walking in darkness have seen a great light. On those living in the land of the shadow of death, a light has dawned.” Now there’s a prophetic statement. Now turn to Matt 4:12-16 where you read, “When Jesus heard that John had been put in prison, he returned to Galilee. Leaving Nazareth, he went and lived in Capernaum, which was by the lake in the area of Zebulun and Naphtali to fulfill what was said through the prophet Isaiah.” Then you get a quotation from Isaiah 9:1 and 4. “‘In the land of Zebulun, the land of Naphtali, by the way of the Sea, along the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles, the people living in darkness have seen a great light, on those living in the land of the shadow of death, a light has dawned.’ From that time on Jesus began to preach, ‘Repent, for the Kingdom of Heaven is near.’”

Now if you go back to that Isaiah 9 it appears in the context of the section of Isaiah often called, “the Book of the Immanuel.” It begins in chapter 7 and runs through chapter 12. The historical context for the message that Isaiah was bringing in Isaiah chapter 7 through 12 is that the king of Judah, at that time, Ahaz, had been threatened by an attack from a coalition of kings from the Northern Kingdom and from Rezin of Damascus. And in view of that threat in chapter 7, Isaiah goes out and confronts Ahaz and says, “Don’t be afraid of these people. It’s really not going to happen. Put your trust in the Lord.” Ahaz has no interest in putting his trust in the Lord. What he does instead is make an alliance with the Assyrians. And if you think about that you have the Northern Kingdom just to the north of Judah, Damascus a little further north, but further to the

North and West and behind them is Assyria. So, he goes around and behind them and makes an alliance with Assyria, who provides protection from the threat from Pekah of Samaria and Rezin of Damascus.

Of course, that alliance with Assyria will eventually lead to Assyria coming down, taking Damascus, then taking Samaria, and threatening Judah. It led to a lot of problems, for both Israel and Judah. In chapter 9 of Isaiah, a very dark picture is drawn, for the region north of the Sea of Galilee. That is precisely the region devastated by the Assyrian king Tiglath-pileser. If you look at 2 Kings 15:29 you have a description of the advance of Tiglath-pileser and it says, “In the time of Pekah king of Israel,” who was the one threatening Ahaz, “Tiglath-pileser king of Assyria came and took Ijon, Abel Beth Maacah, Janoah, Kedesh, and Hazor. He took Gilead and Galilee, including all the land of Naphtali.” It is the very area that Isaiah is describing in 9:1. “And deported the people to Assyria.”

So, a dark picture is drawn of that area north of the Sea of Galilee, but Isaiah then goes on to say in chapter 9, at some future time in that very area that darkness is going to be dispelled by a great light. In Isaiah 9 you might wonder, what is that great light?

Verse 2, “The people walking in darkness in that area of Zebulun and Naphtali have seen a great light; on those living in the land of the shadow of death a light has dawned.” I might say in this whole passage, you get into an interpretive issue related to the use of Hebrew verbal tenses. The tenses are all perfect tenses. If you go down, for example, where this unfolds further in verse 6, where “unto us a child is born,” a very familiar verse, “unto us a son is given.” Those are perfect tenses. “Unto us a child *has been* born, a son *has been* given.” But it’s prophetic perfect. It really should be translated as the future and all through this passage should really be translated as the future. So the great light that was to dispel the darkness in that region was invaded by the Assyrian king in the aftermath of Ahaz’s alliance with the Assyrians, but Jesus’ Galilean ministry is centered in that very region.

But you see, Isaiah’s prophecy doesn’t have all the particulars. It doesn’t fill in all the details. When Christ comes you can say, yes, it fits, this is a wonderful view of the

long-range future, and a picture of the first advent of Christ. But you see that “enigmatic character,” you might say, that is characteristic of prophetic discourse. There’s usually an enigmatic character of prophecies and predictive statements prior to their fulfillment. That is what distinguishes, prophetic discourse from historical discourse. So predictive prophecy is not history written beforehand.

But there you’re not dealing with historical discourse in a prophetic voice. It’s not predictive prophecy. My comments are about predictive prophecy. There are sections of Isaiah like chapters 36-39 where you have historical discourse which is really discourse like Kings. In sections in Jeremiah you have a discourse that is like Kings.

3. The Progressive Character of Predictive Prophecy

All right, let’s go on to 3., “The progressive character of predictive prophecy.” I think just as with revelation in general, so with predictive prophecy, you have a gradual unfolding and development. So, on certain prophetic themes you get, with the progress of revelation, increasingly more information, more of the details filled in. That progressive character of predictive prophecy gives us more information. But, the ambiguity and enigmatic character of prophecy, is not totally eliminated by the greater amount of material.

An example of this might be the antichrist. The picture of the antichrist, develops slowly. As you get more information about this person, the picture gets fuller, but not to the extent that you have a complete picture. Thus you have all these mistaken identifications, I think, in the history of interpretation. In Daniel 7, there’s a little horn that is spoken of. In the context of the succession of kingdoms, they are pictured as 4 beasts, and that little horn makes war with the saints. It seems to be representative of a leader opposed to God and to God’s people. But you don’t get any real clear detailed description of who this individual is. In Daniel 9, you get a little bit more information, where there’s reference to the abomination of desolation, and in chapter 12, a little more. But, then when you go to the New Testament, in 2 Thessalonians 2:4, you have reference to a man of sin, who represents himself as God and sits in the temple. Revelation 13,

there's a beast that seems to be similar to the little horn in Daniel 7, so you start linking biblical passages. You get more and more information, but not enough to dispel all the enigmatic character. The progressive character of predicted prophecy is an important feature of it. But, it doesn't totally eradicate the enigmatic character of predictive prophecy.

4. Predictive Prophecy Has its Own Peculiar Time Perspective

Number 4., "Predictive prophecy has its own peculiar time perspective." For the most part you do not have a great deal of emphasis on precise chronological information in predictive prophecies. There are a few exceptions, but in general you don't. In addition to that, often it seems that a number of events are presented in a way that seems to compress them into what appears to be a rather short period of time. Some people speak of that as the prophetic time perspective. Look at your citations, page 21, under Louis Berkhof's *Principles of Biblical Interpretation*. He says, "The element of time is a rather negligible quantity in the prophets. While designations of time are not altogether wanting, their numbers are exceptionally small. The prophets compressed great events into a brief space of time, brought momentous movements close together in a temporal sense, and took them in at a single glance. This is called 'the prophetic perspective,' or as Delitzsch calls it, 'the foreshortening of the prophet's horizon.'" You've perhaps heard of that descriptive phrase. "They looked upon the future as a traveler does upon a mountain range in the distance. He fancies that one mountain-top rises up right behind the other, when in reality they are miles apart." You see that referenced in "the prophetic perspective of the day of the Lord, and the twofold coming to Christ." I think that picture is helpful. I'm sure you've seen that, where you're traveling and you see a mountain range, and it looks like they're close together. You get to the top of one, and the next one is a long way forward.

a. Example: Isaiah 61:1-2 and Luke 4

Look at Isaiah 61:1 and 2, and its New Testament quotation in Luke 4. In Isaiah, 61: 1 and 2, Isaiah says, "The spirit of the sovereign Lord is on me, because the Lord has

anointed me to preach the good news to the poor. He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted and to proclaim freedom for the captives and release from darkness for the prisoners, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor and the day of vengeance of our God." It is to the second verse that I want to call your attention. When in Luke 4, Jesus reads from that, in the synagogue. Luke 4:16, "He went to Nazareth, where he had been brought up. And on the Sabbath day, he went into the synagogue as was his custom. And he stood up to read. The scroll of the prophet Isaiah was handed to him. Unrolling it, he found a place where it is written," (and this is Isaiah 61:1 and 2) "The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners, and recovery of sight to the blind, and release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor," And he stops. You notice he stops in the middle of verse 2. Then it says, "He rolled up the scroll, and gave it back to the attendant and sat down. The eyes of everyone in the synagogue were fastened on him. He began by saying to them, 'Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing.'" But you notice he didn't read 2b of Isaiah 61, "and the day of vengeance of our God." The day of vengeance of our God was not fulfilled in his day. That would be fulfilled at his second advent. So, in other words, 61:1 and 2a were fulfilled in his first advent. But 61: 2b was not to be fulfilled until his second advent. But if you read Isaiah 61:1 and 2, it looks like those two things are going to happen in close proximity in time. Between Isaiah 61:2a, and 61:2b, there is a time gap. So that foreshortening of the prophetic horizon, is something that you have to keep in mind, when dealing with prophets. There may be time gaps between even, phrases that make up one sentence. You can hardly know that in advance, unless you have information that makes it clear. Like here, you can compare Scripture with Scripture and I think it makes it clearer.

Keil says, now I don't have this in your citations, "The prophets in the Spirit behold the future as if it were present; that to their spirit the images and configurations of the future appear as present, as already actual realities. This explains not only the predominant use of the so-called prophetic perfect in the prophetic discourse." They can speak of things, as in the perfect tense as if it was completed action, yet it is future,

because they see that present reality of the future fulfillment. “But also the fact that the chronological order of the predicted events retires into the background, prophecy assuming the so-called perspective character.” So that’s another characteristic you have to keep in mind with predictive prophecy, that the time perspective is different than the time perspective you will have in historical records.

5. The Message of Predictive Prophecy May Be Couched in Culturally Dated Terminology.

Let’s go on to 5., “The message of predictive prophecy may be couched in culturally dated terminology.” This is an interesting issue because it brings up a host of interpretive questions when you’re dealing with actual prophecy. I think when you read predictive prophecy you realize that the prophets spoke with their own contemporaries, in the language, thought patterns, and in the cultural setting of their own time. As is to be expected they used language and terminology that was appropriate for their own time. If they talk about transportation, they’re going to talk about horses and chariots and camels and small ships—things of that sort, the kinds of modes of transportation that were typical of that day. If they speak about weapons and armaments, they’re going to talk about swords, shields, bows and arrows and slingshots. If they talk about the means and manner of worship they’re going to talk in language that reflects the temple services or the sacrifices. If they talk about world events that involve other nations and peoples, they’re going to speak in terms of the nations that surrounded Israel at the time in which they lived: Moab, Edom, Egypt, Babylon, Assyria and so on.

a. Culturally Dated Terminology – Literal Approach

Now having said that, when you come to any given predictive prophecy that uses culturally dated terminology it raises the question of how to understand that culturally dated terminology. What do you do with it? I think that there are three basic ways in which the interpreters have dealt with that particular feature of predictive prophecy. I want to mention them and then go back and look at each of them in more detail. The first

way is to insist on a literal fulfillment, even on culturally dated terminology, right down to the details. If a prophet in some predictive passage speaks of horses and chariots, then at the time of fulfillment there are going to be horses and chariots involved. If he speaks of bow and arrows, those exact weapons will be used at the time of fulfillment. If he speaks of Moab and Edom, Moab and Edom are going to be involved at the time of fulfillment.

Now, let me make just a brief comment here. It seems to me to do that doesn't take into account sufficiently the cultural milieu of the prophet and the people to whom he spoke. If he had been speaking to his contemporaries and using 20th century language most of what he said would've been incomprehensible. Certainly the weapons of war we know were unthought-of and unheard of in the time of Isaiah or to whomever you're speaking. It would make his message meaningless to the people to whom he spoke. So it seems to me, the prophet spoke in ways that would be understandable to his audience. The question is: What do we do with that kind of culturally dated terminology, when we look to the time of fulfillment?

b. Symbolic Meaning – Spiritualization of Prophecy

A second approach some interpreters have taken, in contrast to insisting on literal fulfillment, is to say there is a symbolic meaning to the entire prophecy. I don't like to use the following word but I think it probably captures this method better than any other word, and that is the word "spiritualization." In other words, you spiritualize the prophecy. The words are not then understood in a physical or material sense at all. But they're viewed as symbolic of spiritual realities and spiritual forces. Now that's kind of vague. I think we have to look at a passage and see how it works to understand exactly what that means, but keep that second category in mind. Spiritualization; it's symbolic of spiritual realities, described by culturally dated terminology.

c. Looking for Equivalent or Correspondences

The third category is that some interpreters deal with culturally dated terminology

by looking for equivalents or correspondence. In other words, interpreters of this approach would accept that there's an element of figurative language in the prophet's discourse, but they do not spiritualize. They still view the language as referring to tangible material realities. If bows and arrows are talked of in terms of weapons we look for an equivalence or correspondence at the time of fulfillment. We look for tanks and rockets or something equivalent. One looks for counterparts for the weapons of the time in which the prophets spoke. The enemies of the God's people in the time of the prophet will be replaced by later enemies who occupy the corresponding territory. So we look at Moab and Edom. Moab and Edom are gone. Who lives in those territories at the time of fulfillment? Assyria is gone. Who lives there? What nation is that that corresponds to the people of the time of which the prophet spoke? So I think there are those basic three approaches to culturally dated terminology: literal fulfillment, spiritualization and speaking of spiritual realities, and looking for analogy, correspondence or equivalents.

These lines are hard to draw. And there is always a question of how do you really apply these to a given passage. It is hard to generalize. You have to look at specific passages and wrestle with the language and content of individual passages. So it does seem theoretically like these are tight categories. They are probably not that tight but it depends on how they are implemented.

d. Example: Isaiah 11 and the Spiritualizing Approach

Let's look at Isaiah 11 the last part of the chapter. The first part of the chapter you're probably familiar with because the first part has that section with verse 6, "The wolf will live with the lamb, the leopard will lie down with the goat, the calf and the lion and the yearling together; and a little child will lead them. The cow will feed with the bear, their young will lie down together, and the lion will eat straw like the ox." Verse 9, "They will neither harm nor destroy on all my holy mountain, for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea." This is speaking of that future time when there's absence of external danger. Everyone is living in peace and harmony. But when you get down to the second half of that chapter, we read in verse 10, "In that

day the root of Jesse will stand for the banner of the people. The people will rally to him and his resting place will be glorious.” Then 11 to the end, “In that day the Lord will reach out his hand a second time to reclaim the remnant of his people from Assyria, from Lower Egypt, from Upper Egypt, from Cush, from Elam, from Babylonia, from Hamath and from the islands of the sea. He will raise a banner for the nations and gather the exiles of Israel; he will assemble the scattered people of Judah from the four quarters of the earth. Ephraim's jealousy will vanish, and Judah's enemies will be cut off; Ephraim will not be jealous of Judah, nor Judah hostile toward Ephraim. They will swoop down on the slopes of Philistia to the west; together they will plunder the people to the east. They will lay hands on Edom and Moab, and the Ammonites will be subject to them. The Lord will dry up the gulf of the Egyptian sea; with a scorching wind he will sweep his hand over the Euphrates River. He will break it up into seven streams so that men can cross over in sandals. There will be a highway for the remnant of his people that is left from Assyria, as there was for Israel when they came up from Egypt.”

Look at your citations page 23. I want to use E. J. Young's commentary on Isaiah as an example of that second category. In other words, you have culturally dated terminology; how do you deal with it? Young suggests you spiritualize it and you say the language is symbolic of spiritual realities. I think Young gives a good illustration of that second category. You notice in verse 12, “He will raise a banner for the nations and gather the exiles of Israel; he will assemble the scattered people of Judah from the four quarters of the earth.” His comment on 12 is, “The Messiah will be a drawing point for the heathen, and through the work of Christian preaching and Christian missionaries He will draw them unto Himself. How important, particularly in this day and age, therefore that the church send forth to the four corners of the earth missionaries who are aflame with the truth that apart from true Messiah, Jesus, there is no salvation.” Isaiah 11:13, “Ephraim's jealousy will vanish, and Judah's enemies will be cut off; Ephraim will not be jealous of Judah, nor Judah hostile toward Ephraim.” What's that talking about? Young says, “In Christ all national, sectional and regional distinctions will be abolished, and through the figure employed in this verse we learn that in Christ there is a true unity and

place for all men of whatever race and color. In Christ alone can they be one.” Then verse 14, “They will swoop down on the slopes of Philistia to the west; together they will plunder the people to the east. They will lay hands on Edom and Moab, and the Ammonites will be subject to them.” Young says, “Here is the true unity of the faith in opposition to the hostility of the world. This true unity does not hide itself in cringing self-defense expecting attack. It takes the offensive; the enemies of the Messiah must be destroyed, and in the strength of the unity that the Messiah gives, the people fly upon the Philistines, representatives of the enemies of God and His Church.” Now notice the next comment, “What Isaiah is here describing cannot, of course, be understood in a literal sense. Rather, here is a beautiful picture of the unity that is the possession of the saints of God, obtained for them not through their own works, but through the blood of Christ, and of the vigorous, active participation in the work of conquering the enemy world, a conquering which is brought about through the sending of missionaries and the constant, active, vigorous, faithful proclamation of the whole counsel of God to every creature.” So this is the spread of the gospel, worldwide evangelization.

Young continues, “The glorious hope here held for God’s people does not consist in the despoliation of nomad Arabs of the desert. It rather consists in the blessed task of making the saving power of God known even to those who, like the apostle Paul, had once been persecutors of the church... The picture is a complete reversal of condition, not to take place in Palestine, but in the great field of the world, a reversal which will consist in the people of God reaching out to bring all men and make them captive to Christ.” So that’s the spiritualizing approach. Now is that what Isaiah’s talking about? That’s a tough question.

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