

Robert Vannoy, Foundations of Biblical Prophecy, Lecture 15

Guidelines for Interpreting Prophecy

IX. Guidelines for Interpreting Prophecy

4. Avoid the Idea of Double Fulfillment or Double Reference

Last week we were in Roman numeral IX., “Guidelines for the interpretation of prophecy.” We were discussing, “Avoid the idea of double fulfillment or double reference.” As a result we concluded that as a hermeneutical rule we shouldn’t set out looking for multiple fulfillments of predictive prophecy. That’s something that in the prophetic literature you will find is quite commonly done, where some predictive statement will be interpreted as having a near fulfillment and a far fulfillment. We looked at the example of Daniel 8 last week where some would suggest that chapter refers to Antiochus Epiphanies, was the persecutor of God’s people during that Greek period in approximately 164 B.C., but then say at the same time, it’s talking about the antichrist. This gives the same words a double reference. The same words and same phrases are both talking about Antiochus and the antichrist.

We talked about some of the theoretical issues there, how if words have more than one meaning, do they have any meaning? Does this make the hermeneutics indeterminate? It seems that we should look for the single sense rather than look for multiple senses. It seems to me that this is an important hermeneutical principle not just with predictive prophecy but with statements of Scripture in general. We could go back to the early centuries of the church with the allegorical method where you looked for 3, 4, 5, or 6 different meanings of any given statement with moral meanings, historical meanings, and spiritual meanings. When you have multiple layers of meaning of the text, you wonder what the text is actually saying.

a. Malachi 4:5-6

Now I said at the end of our session last time that I did want to look at one additional passage and that was Malachi 4:5 and 6—which happens to be the last two

verses of the Old Testament—because this is also a prophecy in which many have found multiple reference. It's also a prophetic statement that presents some difficult problems in terms of interpretation. So let's look at it. Malachi 4:5 and 6 says, "See, I will send you the prophet Elijah before that great and dreadful day of the Lord comes. He will turn the hearts of the fathers to their children and the hearts of the children to their fathers; or else I will come and strike the land with a curse." The question that arises is, has that been fulfilled or is it yet to be fulfilled? Remember we talked earlier when you look for fulfillment, initially start looking in the Old Testament see if a prediction is fulfilled within the Old testament period. If not, look in the New Testament and see if it has been fulfilled in the New Testament period. If it is beyond the New Testament then maybe in the time of the church age or even eschatologically in the age to come. These are the last two verses of the Old Testament so you can't do much with looking for fulfillment in the Old Testament. So you move beyond that—you go to the New Testament and look for fulfillment, and you find that there are New Testament references to Elijah. But then you can say well maybe it is fulfilled in Elijah and also has a future fulfillment. So is there a multiple sense here?

b. NT References to Mal 4:5-6

If you look at New Testament references to Elijah, there's a reference to the appearance of Elijah on the Mount of Transfiguration in Matthew 17:3. We are going to come back to this chapter later, because later in the chapter Elijah appears again. But you read in verse 3, "There appeared before them Moses and Elijah talking with Jesus." There is no indication that this is a fulfillment of Malachi 4:5 and 6.

There are other New Testament references that seem to indicate that Malachi 4:5 and 6 is to be understood as fulfilled in the life and ministry of John the Baptist. There are several references. Look at Luke 1:13 where you read, "The angel said to Zechariah, 'Do not be afraid. Your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son and you are to give him the name John.'" In verse 15, "He will be great in the sight of the Lord." Verse 16, "Many of the people of Israel he will bring back to the Lord their God."

And in verse 17, “He will go on before the Lord in the spirit and power of Elijah.” Then you’ll notice the next phrase which is a quotation of Malachi 4:6, “He will go on before the Lord in the spirit and power of Elijah to turn the hearts of the fathers to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.” So there’s at least a partial quotation of Malachi 4:6 in that phrase of “turning the hearts of the fathers to their children.” So it is certainly an allusion to 4:6 of Malachi, “He will turn the hearts of the fathers to their children.”

Look at Matthew 11:2 and following, “When John heard in prison what Christ was doing, he sent his disciples to ask him, ‘Are you the one we were expecting to come or should we be expecting someone else?’ And Jesus said, ‘Go back and report to John what you hear and see. The blind receiving sight...’” and so on. In verse 7 it says, “As John’s disciples were leaving Jesus, Jesus began to speak to the crowd about John, ‘What did you go out into the desert to see? A reed swayed by the wind? If not, what did you go out to see? A man dressed in fine clothes? No, those who wear fine clothes are in king’s palaces. Then what did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. This is the one about whom it is written: “I will send my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way before you.” I tell you the truth, among those born of women there has not risen anyone greater than John the Baptist.’” That’s verse 10, which is a quotation not of Malachi 4:5 and 6, but of Malachi 3:1 where you read, “See I will send my messenger who will prepare the way before me.” But when you go down further in that passage, you read in Matthew 11:12, “From the days of John until now the kingdom of heaven has been forcefully advancing and forceful men lay hold of it. For all the prophets and the law prophesied until John.” Then notice verse 14, “And if you are willing to accept it, he is the Elijah who was to come. He who has ears to hear, let him hear.” That seems to be a reference to Malachi 4:5 and 6, that Elijah is to come before the great and dreadful day of the Lord. He, John, is Elijah who is to come “if you are willing to accept it.”

Then go to Matthew 17:10-12. This is after the prayer with Elijah up on the Mount Transfiguration and you read in verse 10, “The disciples asked him, ‘Why, then do the

teachers of the law say Elijah must come first?’ Jesus replied ‘To be sure, Elijah is coming, and will restore all things. But I tell you Elijah has already come and they did not recognize him but have done to him everything they wished. In the same way the Son of Man is going to suffer at their hands.’ Then the disciples understood that he was talking to them about John the Baptist.” Elijah has already come, and he was talking about John the Baptist.

So you get those texts, and then just to throw a little curveball in the mix, you look at John 1:19 and following, “This was John’s testimony when the Jews of Jerusalem sent priests and Levites to ask him who he was. He did not fail to confess, but confessed freely, ‘I am not the Christ’. And they asked him ‘Then who are you? Are you Elijah?’ He said ‘I am not’, ‘Are you the prophet?’” The prophet there probably referenced the text that we looked at earlier Deuteronomy 18, “The prophet who was to come like Moses.” “‘Are you the prophet?’ ‘No.’”

c. Interpreting Approaches

So I think those are the most important references that relate to this prophecy at the end of Malachi. What do interpreters do with these texts? The question is how is Malachi 4:5 and 6 fulfilled? Has it been fulfilled in John? Is it yet to be fulfilled? Let me give you three different views.

1) Double Reference

The first one is “Double Reference.” What some interpreters say about Malachi’s prophecy is that that prophecy tells us that Elijah will return to earth before the Day of the Lord, and that will happen in the literal sense. That was the view of the Rabbis found in John 1:21, “Are you Elijah?” They were looking for the return of Elijah. So double reference advocates see Malachi’s prophecy as having an initial or partial fulfillment in John the Baptist on the basis of those texts, particularly Matthew’s. But they argue that its complete and final fulfillment awaits the second coming of Christ and the coming of the day of the Lord at that time, where Elijah, the prophet, will appear.

Look at your citations on page 26; this is a short paragraph from Henry Alford's *The Greek New Testament*. I should say Alford here is commenting on Matthew 11:13 and 14. He says, "Neither this nor the testimony of our Lord in Matthew 17:12 is inconsistent with John's own denial that he was Elijah in John 1:21. For, one, the question there was evidently asked as assuming a reappearance of the actual Elijah upon earth; and, two, our Lord cannot be understood in either of these passages [in Matthew] as meaning that the prophecy of Malachi 4:5 received its full completion in John. For as in other prophecies, so in this one, we have," and here's the view, "a partial fulfillment both in the coming of the Lord and of His forerunner, while the great and complete fulfillment is yet future—at the great day of the Lord." So that's not an uncommon view that Malachi 4:5 and 6 has a double reference, a reference to John the Baptist and a future reference to a literal Elijah reappearing.

2) Generic or Successive Fulfillment – Walter Kaiser

Second view, is one advocated by Walter Kaiser in connection with his concept of what he calls a generic use of prophecy. We might call this the "generic view." If you look at your citations page 27 there are a few paragraphs there from Kaiser's commentary on Malachi called *God's Unchanging Love*, and these paragraphs are discussing Malachi 4:5 and 6. Kaiser says of these verses, "Perhaps the best way to describe this phenomenon is to call it a 'generic prediction,' which Willis J. Beecher defined." Here is what he means by the term, "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, where in applying to the whole of a complex event, also applies to some of its parts." Now that's kind of a complex concept but you can diagram it like this and label this is a whole "generic prophecy." The prophecy would speak of the whole complex of particulars, you might say. But certain parts of the prophecy may speak of this one or of that one within the complex of particulars.

Now I think what Kaiser was really trying to do here is have it both ways. In other

words, I think he wants to avoid the concept of double reference and double fulfillment, and, in fact, if you read his writings—and he has written in numerous books and articles—he often talks about how the only legitimate meaning for any biblical statement is the single truth intended by the author. So you have to get to the authorial intent. What was the true intention of the author when he writes? It seems to me if you're going to talk about a single truth intention, this gets very complicated and abstract to say a prophecy like Malachi 4:5 and 6 is a “generic prediction” that has a number of particulars. The whole is the single truth intention but parts of it may refer to one particular within the whole and other parts to another particular. Let me come back to this in a minute but let's go back to Kaiser's own words because I don't want to misrepresent him here. After that completion of the definition of Beecher's “generic prediction,” here is what Kaiser says, “In keeping with the characteristics of generic, or successive fulfillment, of prophecy, Malachi closes with a promise that God would send that messenger introduced in 3:1 as the forerunner of the Messiah. However, he does not say that he will be Elijah the Tishbite, but ‘Elijah the prophet’ and he thereby opens the door for a succession of announcers all the way up to the second advent of Messiah when the first and last Elijah would step forth as the beginning and the end of the prophets. Elijah, has been selected since he was the head of the prophetic order.” So you can question, was he or was Samuel the head of the prophetic order? But “all other prophets followed him. He was also a reformer whom God raised up in ‘a remarkably corrupt age,’ and whose rejection was followed by a particularly terrible day of the Lord, namely, first with the inflictions of the Syrians and the captivity of Israel. But Elijah's spirit and power were passed onto his successor, Elisha (2 Kings 2:15), just as the spirit of Moses came to rest on the 70 elders.

Thus,” and here's his conclusion, “John the Baptist came in that same line of reformers, prophets and forerunners of the Messiah, for he too came ‘in the spirit and power of Elijah.’ And from Elijah's day to ours, a long line of foretellers, has stood in the succession; men like Augustine, Calvin, Meno Simons, Luther, Zwingli, Moody, and Graham.” So it seems to me what he's saying is this is a generic prophecy. It is going to

begin with Elijah, John the Baptist is here standing in that succession, and end with Elijah and in between you have all of these other people who are also a part of the fulfillment of it because they come also in the spirit and power of Elijah. So that whole thing is encompassed as this generic prediction in the words of Malachi.

Now my question there is how do you keep this single truth intention, and find the application through all these particulars within the single truth intention? Theoretically you might say it is possible. Does this avoid multiple fulfillments? I'm not so sure it does. I think Kaiser would argue that it does because you have this generic prediction. But it seems to me that it becomes a very abstract conception, and I wonder if that was the intent of this statement at the end of Malachi. The question is how do you establish what this abstract single truth intention might have been? Where do you get this kind of a model? I think you can only look at the words of Malachi 4:5 and 6. Do the words of Malachi 4:5 and 6 bring up this sort of an intent as far as meaning is concerned? It seems to me it is more of a construction that is brought to the text and it is brought with the intent to avoid multiple fulfillment. But I am not sure it's totally satisfying, it is pretty theoretical. So you have the more straightforward kind of multiple fulfillments like Alford, and you get this generic prophecy which tries to avoid it but I am not sure it does.

3) Prophecy is Fulfilled in John the Baptist

A third position is that the prophecy is fulfilled in John the Baptist. This conclusion would be based on the New Testament references that apply the prophecy explicitly to John, and those are pretty strong statements. In Matthew 11:14, "If you are willing to accept it, he is the Elijah who was to come." That's a pretty strong statement. In chapter 17 Jesus says, "Elijah has already come, and they did not recognize him." Remember when we talked about the enigmatic character of the prophecy and how it can take the fulfillment and twist it, and you might not have expected it. "He has already come, but you did not recognize him," the disciples understood He was talking about John. So advocates of this view would say it is fulfilled in John the Baptist, saying that we don't need to look for an additional fulfillment. There is the single intended sense.

This is not the only place in the Old Testament where you find a twist that you might not expect. There are prophecies that speak of a future reign of David, for example, where, if you really look closely at the prophecies, it is clearly intended as a reference to Christ. Here is a reference to the coming of Elijah but is fulfilled in John. Look at Jeremiah 30 verse 9. This verse is an example of that. You read, “They will serve the Lord their God and David their king, whom I will raise up for them.” You go down further, “I will save you out of a distant place, your descendants from the land of their exile. Jacob will again have peace and security and no one will make him afraid. Though I completely destroy all the nations among which I scatter you, I will not completely destroy you. I will discipline you but only with justice.” So there is going to be a future time when in verse 17 “I will restore you to health, heal your wounds and they will serve the Lord their God and David their king.” Well, it seems to be messianic and fulfilled in Christ.

Look at Ezekiel 34:23, “I will place over them one shepherd, my servant David, and he will tend them.” And verse 25, “I will make a covenant of peace with them.” Verse 27, “The people will be secure in their land.” Verse 28, “They will no longer be plundered by the nations, they will live in safety and no one will make them afraid.” That is much like the Isaiah passages of Isaiah 2 and 11. But, “I will place one shepherd over them, my servant David,” yet here is the reference to Christ. So it seems to me that there are some pretty solid grounds for understanding the prophet’s intent. Malachi 4:5 and 6 have a reference to it, what interests me is a reference to John and that the coming of Elijah is fulfilled in John. But if you do that then John 1:21—where you get John’s denial that he is Elijah, “The Jews, the priests and the Levites asked him, ‘Who are you? Are you Elijah?’ And he said, ‘I am not.’”—that would be a denial of the conception of the Rabbis who were looking for a literal fulfillment. He is not literally Elijah. He is not denying that he is the fulfillment of the prophecy of Malachi 4. At least, that is a possible way to understand it.

d. Vannoy's Analysis and Conclusion on Double Reference

Maybe it depends on what they do with the Matthew text. Then what do you with this "if you will accept it." Jesus' statements in Matthew that John "is the Elijah who was to come and if you accept that Elijah has already come." What do you do with that? Those are pretty strong statements; I don't think you can just jump over them and say there is no fulfillment in those statements at all. So you can almost be forced into a double fulfillment if you go to the Revelation 11:3. Revelation 11:3 says, "I will give power to my two witnesses they will prophesy in sackcloth to everyone. If anyone tries to harm them, fire will come to support them." These two witnesses are not identified. There are a lot of people who say that those two witnesses are Moses and Elijah, but that's an open question. There is no clear indication who those two witnesses are. So it seems to me you are on firmer ground, as far as biblical statements, to say it is fulfilled in John, than to say there is some human fulfillment in those two witnesses.

What my purpose in bringing this up is we have been talking about this thing that you go and look for a double reference. I am not saying it is impossible to find a double reference but I am saying it is a dangerous hermeneutical principle to be going and looking for multiple senses. My own conclusion is with these difficult texts—and we have looked at two of them in some detail—that Deuteronomy 18 refers to the prophetic institution, or that is Christ. I don't think that you are forced into double reference there. The context is clearly the prophetic institution which I think psychologically points forward to Christ. So it is legitimate to say Deuteronomy 18 speaks of Christ but not with the same words. The words themselves refer to the prophetic institution. It seems to me in Malachi 4:5 and 6 you are not forced into a double reference because there is an unexpected twist of the prophecy in the fulfillment of John, but the New Testament's statements are pretty strong and finding fulfillment in John is adequate. You don't need another fulfillment. The Daniel passage that we looked at told us you don't need to look for another reference to the fulfillment of Christ.

I'd say the other tough one is Isaiah 7:14, "the virgin shall conceive and bear a son." But when you look in the context, it's tied in tightly to the war against Judah, and

yet if you see it as a single meaning, that is referring to Christ as Matthew does. “The virgin shall conceive and bear a son,” is there a reference to the birth in the time of Christ? I think it is just a reference to Christ. I don’t think there was any virgin in the time of Isaiah. It seems to me in the context you can bring something to the text itself if the child was born in the immediate future before he was old enough to know and distinguish between good and evil these two kings would be gone. So that’s kind of a hypothetical thing. You can use it for a measure of time if the child would be born. It seems to me that it points to the child in the future, coming through a virgin. As far as I am concerned there was only one virgin birth.

5. Interpretive Analysis Must Precede a Decision on the Exact Relationship between the Literal and the Figurative in any passage

Let’s go on to 5., “Interpretive Analysis must precede a decision on the exact relationship between the literal and the figurative in any passage.” This question of literal versus figurative interpretation is an extremely complex and difficult one. When you look at and hear about predictive prophecy—and of course the issue is wider than just predictive prophecy—but if you are looking at a biblical statement or any kind of literature, if you are going to move from a literal understanding of what was said, to a figurative understanding, there should be reasons within the context that arises and reasons that lead you to conclude this statement was not intended to be taken literally.

Look at your citations on page 30; this is from Berkeley Mickelsen *Interpreting the Bible*, “Remember that interpretive analysis must precede a decision on the exact relationship between the literal and the figurative in any passage.” So you look at a passage and you wrestle with what this passage saying. Where do you come to a relationship between the literal and the figurative? “Deciding what is literal and what is figurative must be based upon grammar, (meanings of words and the relationship of words), history, culture, context, and convictions of the original writer himself. The literal meaning—the customary and socially acknowledged meaning which carries with it the ideas of actual and earthly—must become the base for figurative meanings. Upon this

base they depend. If a given interpreter declares that a certain expression is figurative, he must give reasons for assigning a figurative meaning.” It’s a valid point. You just don’t come to a text and think figurative unless there is something in that text that suggests this is the way this is intended to be read. “These reasons must arise from an objective study of all factors and must show why the figurative meaning is needed. Sometimes interpreters insist that elements are figurative because their system of eschatology requires it, not because the Scriptures and objective factors demand it.” In other words, here you get into the issue, when we come to a biblical text what takes priority in reading that text? Do you start reading the text itself, or do you start reading the text from some preconceived system and read the text in light of that system? How do you relate the text to the system? What is the controlling principle?

a. Avoid Simplistic Labels

Sometimes interpreters insist that elements are figurative because their system of eschatology requires it, not because the Scriptures and objective factors demand it. Where there are compelling reasons for figurative meanings, they should be adopted. A careful interpreter will interpret both literally and figuratively because the passage he is interpreting demands these procedures. I think these labels “I interpret literally” or “I interpret figuratively”—those things are not helpful at all. You need to come to the text on this issue with an open mind, and be open to where the text leads you. “Labels suggesting a man is either a completely literal interpreter or a completely figurative interpreter are foolish. If they were true, they would indicate that the individual thus designated would be totally unable to grapple with meanings and ideas. Such people do not usually try to interpret. Therefore, a careless tossing around of labels should be avoided at all costs. The well balanced interpreter has objective reasons for both literal and figurative meanings.”

b. Figurative is not Something Negative

Interpreting figuratively is not to be viewed as something negative, misguided or

misdirected. If it's the intent of the passage to read it in the figurative sense, then you can say that the literal meaning of the passage is to be read in a figurative way. It is the intended meaning of the passage. But that raises questions of how theological systems relate to the individual passages. Do you interpret the passage on the basis of the system or do you build the system on the basis of the exegesis of individual passages? You look at a host of individual passages and see what they're saying. If you come to your conclusions on that then you try to see what the relationships are by connecting passages and you gradually build a system. I think that is the best way to start, work with the individual passages. But having said that, it is awfully difficult with some passages to interpret them in total isolation of other passages. Usually what you find is there is a kind of a working in both directions, out of the passage to build the system but also from the system back to help interpret individual passages. It seems to me that it is not an either-or situation here. But having said that, I think the danger is letting the system determine the meaning. You have to be careful of preconceived systems overcoming the individual passage. The reason I say that is meaning needs to come out of the text and not brought to the text, at least not in an unwarranted way.

c. Boettner: Literal unless Absurd Approach

Look at your citations page 30. Loraine Boettner has some interesting statements here about this issue of a literal versus figurative interpretation. He says, "The general the principle of interpretation has been expressed as 'literal wherever possible' or 'literal unless absurd.' One does not have to read far in the Bible to know that not everything can be taken literally. Jesse F. Silver refers to 'certain places,' where some 'other meaning' is designated. But he gives no rule by which those certain places are to be recognized." And I would say I don't know any formula for that either; it is not something you can reduce to a set of three rules or something like that. "We find no labels in Scripture itself telling us, 'Take this literally,' or 'Take this figuratively.' Evidently the individual reader must use his own judgment, backed by as much experience and common sense as he can muster. And that, of course, will vary endlessly from individual to individual. It is

admittedly difficult in many instances to determine whether statements in Scripture should be taken literally or figuratively. As regards prophecy, that often cannot be determined until after the fulfillment.”

d. Malachi 4:5-6 Once Again

Now you go back to Malachi 4:5 and 6 and see that that could be an example of a prophecy with literal and figurative language in it, the element being if not literally Elijah’s return, it is fulfilled in John the Baptist. “Most of the Bible, however, particularly historical and the more didactic portions, clearly is to be understood literally, although some figurative expressions are found in these. But it is also clearly evident that many other portions must be understood figuratively. Even the premillennialists must take many expressions figuratively, or they become nonsense.”

Generally premillennialists tend to read more literally where amillennialists are more symbolical. “Since the Bible gives no hard and fast rule for determining what is literal and what is figurative,” here is where we lie, he says, “we must study the nature of the material, the historical setting, the style and purpose of the writer, and then fall back on what, for lack of a better term, we may call ‘sanctified common sense.’ Naturally the conclusions will vary somewhat from individual to individual for we do not all think alike or see alike.” You want to sort out the figurative from the literal particularly in predictive prophecy. You have to just wrestle with the text and see what it is by looking at the most common syntax, grammar, purpose of the prophecy, and what is being addressed here.

e. Illustration: Isa 2:4 Amillennial and Premillennial Interpretations

Let me give you just a couple of illustrations. Look at Isaiah 2:4 that says, “They will beat their swords into plowshares,” in this coming period of time when there will be peace on earth. “Nation will not take up sword against nation, nor will they train for war anymore” that’s verse 4. Let’s go back to Isaiah 2:1, which says, “This is what Isaiah son of Amoz saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem.” Verse 2, “In the last days.” We must ask

the question “What are the last days?” But “In the last days,” something is going to happen, “the mountain of the Lord’s temple will be established as chief among the mountains. It will be raised above the hills and all nations will stream to it. Many peoples will come and say, ‘Come let us go up to the mountain of the Lord to the house of the Jacob. He will teach us his ways so that we may walk in his paths. The law will go out from Zion, the word of the Lord from Jerusalem. He will judge between the nations, and will settle many disputes for many people. They will beat their swords into plowshares.’” So this is predictive it seems like it is talking about the Messianic kingdom in which the Messiah will judge between the nations and establish peace on earth.

In connection with that in verse 2 it says, “The mountain of the Lord’s temple will be established as chief among the mountains and will be raised above the hills.” What is that talking about? Amillennialists interpret this passage as being fulfilled right now. And the “mountain of the Lord’s temple” is the church. So it’s a symbolic prophecy. The beating of swords into plowshares is the peace that has come about as a result of the working of the Gospel in the hearts of the regenerate individuals. This is presently being fulfilled in a spiritual sense in the church.

Premillennialists will generally say, “No, this is not figurative or symbolical. This is referring to a future time of peace here on earth in which the Messiah will rule and establish his kingdom, as Isaiah 11 describes it as well as in other passages.” But then you get gradations I would say. What’s “the mountain of the Lord’s temple being established chief among the mountains and being raised among the hills”? What is that talking about? I think most premillennialists today would say that’s talking about the prominence of Jerusalem in the end times. It will be the center, as the following verse says, “where people will come and say, ‘Let us go to the mountain of the Lord and he will teach us his ways’” through the prominence of Jerusalem, not taking the “raising” as literal. But there are those who will say “No this is literal ‘the mountain of the Lord’s temple will be raised among the hills’—this is speaking about the geographical elevation of Jerusalem to be the highest mountain on earth.” In other words, Jerusalem, if you really force it, literally will be higher than Mount Everest. It is going to be higher than

that. It's going to be raised above the hills, chief among the mountains. So see you have a kind of spectrum of views that move from strictly literal to having a degree of figurative language to making the whole prophecy figurative or symbolic. You have to wrestle with that. Then you get your eschatological system and feeding back into this, influencing the way in which you are going to read it. So it becomes very complex.

f. Isaiah 4:2

Look at Isaiah 4:2. This is another passage that generally is used as Messianic, and I am inclined to think that 4:2-5 is speaking of the present time of the church. I think this is different than chapter 2 because chapter 2 seems to speak like Isaiah 11 does about the absence of danger. It is a time of external peace and safety. Here in Isaiah 4:2-5, you notice verses 5 and 6 say, "The Lord will create over all of Mount Zion and over those who assemble there and a cloud of smoke by day and a glow of flaming fire by night, over all the glory will be a canopy. It will be a shelter and shade from the heat of the day, a refuge and a hiding place from the storm and the rain." In other words, it seems like a figurative picture of a time in which there is external danger. The Lord is going to provide protection for his people and he is using the language of the Old Testament period of the tabernacle to describe it.

But you notice the way that passage begins in verse 2, "In that day the branch of the Lord will be beautiful and glorious, the fruit of the land will be the pride and glory of the survivors in Israel." What is the branch of the Lord? Most all interpreters will take that as Messianic, as reference to the Messiah. It's a person, you notice verse 4, "The Lord will wash away the filth on the remnant of Zion. He will cleanse the blood stains in Jerusalem by the spirit of judgment and the spirit of fire." So I don't think there's much debate that verse 2 is figurative and the branch of the Lord is figurative language describing the Messiah.

Some people push the figurative further, and maybe legitimately, by saying that in verse 2 you not only have a reference to the Messiah, you also have a reference to the divine/human nature of Christ. In that in the first half of the verse "The branch of the

Lord will be beautiful and glorious” and the second half of the verse, “The fruit of the land will be the pride and glory of the survivors in Israel.” The branch of the Lord, and the fruit of the land, paralleling the Lord is divine, but the Lord is also human. Fruit of the land is figurative for that human nature of Christ. How far do you push this literal versus figurative language here? It’s obviously figurative language but how far can you push it? That’s where you see what Boettner was saying. We’ve got to make judgments, common sense judgments and people are going to differ on how they come down to the conclusion and there are no rules for this. There are not mechanical steps—1, 2, 3, do this and here is your answer. That makes passages like this very interesting, fascinating but it also makes them a challenge to work in responsible ways to come up with conclusions about exactly what the passage is talking about.

g. Turner and Gundry

There is one final citation that’s on page 31. I think the point Turner makes here is correct. He says, “Writers of various eschatological stripes have commonly expressed the view that differences in eschatological systems arise ‘primarily out of the distinctive method employed by each interpretation of the Scripture.’ Though there is a degree of truth in such a statement it is simplistic. One’s consistency in taking biblical language literally will have an obvious influence upon one’s theology, but the reverse is also true—one’s theology will obviously have an influence upon his hermeneutics. It is mistaken to speak of either a ‘literal’ or ‘spiritualizing’ hermeneutic as a purely inductive, overall approach to Scripture. To speak in such generalities obscures the real issue: the interpretation of specific biblical passages.” And that becomes his emphasis here. “Any study of Scripture involves a certain degree of exegetical, theological, and hermeneutical preunderstanding.

Even the cultural and historical circumstances of the interpreter tend to sway his understanding of Scripture, as Gundry has appropriately warned: ‘We as Christians exegetes and theologians are susceptible to influences from the moods and conditions of our times, and especially so in our eschatology.’ All of this is not to say that hermeneutics

is unimportant, or that a consistent literal hermeneutic is unattainable. Indeed, such a hermeneutic is essential in handling the whole Bible, including poetry, prophecy, and figurative language.

Properly used, the result of a literal hermeneutic is not ‘wooden literalism,’ but sensitivity to figures of speech.” It is a literal hermeneutic that is sensitive to figures of speech. “However, in the exegesis of specific biblical passages the exegete must realize that his use of a literal hermeneutic is preconditioned by his theological presuppositions. The same thing will hold true for the practitioner of a ‘spiritualizing’ hermeneutic. It is common for dispensationalists to accuse nondispensationalists of spiritualizing or allegorizing the Bible, especially the Old Testament, and for covenant theologians to charge dispensationalists with hyperliteralism. As long as the debate is carried on in such vague generalities there will be no progress whatsoever. It is time to heed the advice from [Greg] Bahnsen:”

h. Bahnsen’s Advice: Get out of Systems and Look at Specific Texts

It is his exegetical works but I don’t agree with his views on theonomy. But what he says here I think is right. He says, “‘The charge of subjective spiritualization or hyperliteralism against any of the three eschatological positions cannot be settled in general; rather, the opponents must get down to hand-to-hand exegetical combat on *particular* passages and phrasing.’”

In other words, what he is saying is, get out of the systems and start looking at specific texts. What does Isaiah 2 talk about? What does Isaiah 4 talk about? What does Isaiah 11 talk about? Those are some key passages in this whole discussion. Turner says, “It would appear that vague generalities about theoretical hermeneutics accomplish very little. The cavalier dismissal of eschatological systems on the sole ground of hermeneutical theory serves only to obscure the more pertinent issues. Advocates of a ‘dual hermeneutic’ cannot be dismissed with the charge of ‘allegorizing’ and neither can dispensationalists be shouted down with the rebuke of being ‘hyperliteral.’”

However, hermeneutical *conclusions* on specific issues may be viewed as being

inconsistent with one's professed hermeneutical *method*. When there is a discrepancy between the two, both dispensationalists and covenant theologians should take heed. The main burden of these thoughts on the hermeneutical question is that any profitable debate must focus upon concrete issues, such as NT use of the OT and the nature of progressive revelation. Here specific passages may be exegeted and profitably debated." It seems to me what is probably helpful with this larger topic is trying to wrestle with these problems at the level of individual passages rather than from the outside bringing your system to bear on one of those passages.

That finishes our study of Roman numeral IX. I gave you a handout last week but I didn't bring any extras of Roman numeral X, "The apologetic value of biblical prophecy." But we'll look at that next time.

Transcribed by Jessica Skidmore
Rough edited by Ted Hildebrandt
Final edit by Katie Ells
Renarrated by Ted Hildebrandt