

## **Robert Vannoy, Foundations of Biblical Prophecy: Lecture 13b**

### Hermeneutical Principles for Interpreting Prophetic Writings

#### 5. e. Isaiah 11:10-12 Oswald's Approach

Let's look at John Oswald's NICOT commentary on Isaiah, page 286 and following. He says of this larger section, "While the general sense of these verses is clear, the specifics are not so clear. Is the prophet speaking of the return from Babylon in 539 B.C.?" See, it starts out, "The Lord will reach out his hand a second time to reclaim the remnant that is left of his people." Then he speaks in verse 12, of gathering the exiles of Israel, bringing them back to their land. Oswald says, "Is this speaking of the return from Babylon in 539? If so, the Messiah had not yet been revealed and could hardly be the ensign around which the people rallied." We see in verse 10, "In that day, the root of Jesse will stand as a banner for the peoples. The nations will rally to him." It didn't seem to happen in the time of the return from exile. Is Isaiah in fact speaking of the new Israel, the church, as the reformers maintain? For example, Calvin says, "Certainly, believers were gathered to the Messiah from every part of the world [that is E. J. Young's position as well]." And verse 10, in a fashion reminiscent of Isaiah 2:2-4, makes a reference to the nations apart. Nevertheless, here appears Oswald's comment, "The primary focus of the passage seems to be upon the historical nation of Israel, so that one is led to believe it points to some great final ingathering of the Jewish people such as that referred to by Paul in Romans 11. If that has begun in the Zionist movement, as many believe, we may look forward with anticipation to its ultimate completion in a turning to God in Christ by the Jewish nation." It seems that Oswald, as he discusses that further, would really fit into that third category that you have here; some form of description of the return of exiled Israel to their land in connection with their coming to Christ. There's where that line may be fuzzy that was brought up a minute ago.

#### f. J. A. Alexander's Approach

In J.A. Alexander's commentary on Isaiah, page 257, he says, "The prophecy was not fulfilled in the return of the refugees after Sennacherib's discomfiture, nor in the return from Babylon, and but partially in the preaching of the Gospel to the Jews. The complete fulfillment is to be expected when all Israel shall be saved. The prediction must be figuratively understood, because the nations mentioned in this verse have long ceased to exist." See there, you get that culturally invaded terminology. The event prefigured is, according to Keil, the return of the Jews to Palestine; but according to Calvin their admission to Christ's kingdom on repentance and reception of the Christian faith."

So you get that divergence of viewpoint. Verse 14, where Palestine, Edom, Moab and the Moabites are mentioned, Alexander says, "All the names are those of neighboring nations with whom the Hebrews were accustomed to wage war. Edom, Moab, and Ammon, may be specially named for an additional reason, viz. that they were nearly related to Israel, and yet among his most inveterate enemies. The Jews explain this as a literal prediction having respect to the countries formerly possessed by the races here enumerated. Most Christian writers understand it spiritually of the conquests to be achieved by the true religion, and suppose the nations here named to be simply put for enemies in general, or for the heathen world." Note that this is Young's view as well. "This method of description being rendered more emphatic by the historical associations which the names awaken." Later on, he says, "The fulfillment has been sought by different interpreters, in the return from Babylon, in the general progress of the gospel, and in the future restoration of the Jews."

#### g. Vannoy's Approach

I don't see how you can argue with the details of the return from Babylon, but what do you do with this? Is this the general progress of the gospel? Do you spiritualize this? Or do you say it has something to do with the future restoration of Jewish people to their homeland?

I'm more pre-millennial in my eschatology. I'm more inclined to take that latter viewpoint and to look for, with these names, some kind of equivalents, for the places. If they're going to return from Assyria—from Mesopotamia in the area, look for equivalents that correspond. There are, I don't think many, but some who argue that at the end time there's going to be the reconstitution of all these nations, that in the end time there's going to be an Assyria. I think that's pushing it, you see that'd be that first category, those who insist on a literal fulfillment. I think you're down to a second or the third category. The question is, are you comfortable with the spiritualization hermeneutic? Is that the way this was intended to be understood?

There's a good commentary on Isaiah by J.A. Motyer. Some of you may be familiar with that. His brief comment on this passage is, "it's a metaphor: the force to which the nations fall is the gospel." So, he would agree with Young. I'm just trying to use this to illustrate the kinds of interpretive questions that arise when you start looking more closely and seeing this predictive prophecy.

## 6. Predictive prophecy may be conditional

### a. Jer. 18:5-10

Let's go on to 6., "Predictive prophecy may be conditional." Now, to say that means that some prophecies may be dependent on conditions. The condition may be expressed and then it's not problematic. But I think there are examples where it's not expressed, yet may still be a vital part of the prophecy. The text that I think is enormously important in understanding this is Jeremiah 18:5-10. In Jeremiah 18, Jeremiah goes down to the house of the potter, watches him throw some pots, and in verse five, "The Word of the Lord came to Jeremiah and said, 'O, House of Israel, can I not do with you as the potter does? Like clay in the hands of the potter, so you are in my hand, O, House of Israel. If...'" and here are the important statements, "If at any time I announce that a nation or kingdom is to be uprooted, torn down, destroyed, and if that nation I warned repents of it's evil, then I will relent and not inflict on it the disaster I had planned. If at another time, I announce that a nation

or kingdom is to be built up and planted, and if it does evil in my sight and does not obey me, then I will reconsider the good I had intended to do for it.” So, God can make a statement, but if the conduct of the person or the group to which that statement is directed is modified, that may affect the carrying out of what God initially stated he will do.

b. 1 Kings 11 - Jeroboam

When you get to prophetic statements, sometimes you find conditions attached. Look at 1 Kings 11 with Jeroboam I. Look at verse 38. Ahijah the prophet, speaking for the Lord, says to him in verse 38, “If you do whatever I command you, and walk in my ways and do what is right in my eyes by keeping my statutes and commands, as David my servant did, I will be with you. I will build you a dynasty as enduring as the one I built for David and will give Israel to you. I will humble David’s descendants because of this, but not forever.”

But there is a condition: if you do all that I command you, I will build Jeroboam a sure house as I did for David. There is a condition with that, and since Jeroboam did not fulfill the conditions, that prediction was also not fulfilled. Instead of being given a sure house, his house was destroyed.

You go to 1 Kings 15:29 and you read there, “As soon as he began to reign [that is, Baasha], he killed Jeroboam’s whole family. He did not leave Jeroboam anyone that breathed but destroyed them all according to the Word of the Lord given to his servant Ahijah the Shilonite because of the sins Jeroboam had committed and had caused Israel to commit because he provoked the Lord, the God of Israel.” So Jeroboam did not meet the condition and he experienced judgment rather than the establishment of a sure dynasty. But that’s pretty straight-forward, that’s a stated condition.

c. 1 Kings 21:19-27 Ahab

Let’s look at an unstated condition but which still seems to be involved in the

prediction. Look at 1 Kings 21:19. This is in the context of Ahab's taking of Naboth's vineyard. The Lord tells Elijah to tell Ahab, "This is what the Lord says, 'Have you not murdered a man and seized his property?' Then say to him this is what the Lord says, 'In the place where dogs licked up Naboth's blood, dogs will lick up your blood. Yes, yours.'" So there's a prediction but Ahab repented, at least to some degree.

Look at verse 27, "When Ahab heard these words, he tore his clothes, put on sackcloth, and fasted. He lay in sackcloth, went around meekly. Then the word of the Lord came to Elijah the Tishbite: 'Have you noticed how Ahab has humbled himself before me? Because he has humbled himself, I will not bring this disaster in his day. But I will bring it in his house in the days of his son.'" So the judgment is modified. It's not totally removed, but the time element of its enactment is changed to the time of his son.

You read that in 2 Kings 9:25 and 26, in the time of Joram, Ahab's son. He was killed by Jehu. 2 Kings 9:25, "Jehu said to Bidkar, his chariot officer, 'pick [Joram] up and throw him on the field that belonged to Naboth the Jezreelite. Remember how you and I would ride together in chariots behind Ahab his father when the Lord made this prophecy about him. 'Yesterday I saw the blood of Naboth and the blood of his sons, declares the Lord, and I will surely make you pay for it on this plot of ground, declares the Lord.' Now then, pick him up and throw him on that plot, in accordance with the word of the Lord.'" So here's a prediction about the judgment to come on Ahab that was modified because of Ahab's repentance but was enforced in the time of his son Joram exactly as it had been predicted. There was an unstated condition.

#### d. Jonah

You probably have a similar situation in Jonah. Jonah comes to Nineveh, and in chapter 3 verse 4 he makes the statement, "In 40 days, Nineveh shall be overthrown." Nineveh repented, and responded to his message. Nineveh was not

overthrown in 40 days. Eventually, Nineveh was destroyed, but it was long after the time of Jonah.

e. Isaiah 38 – Hezekiah

Look at Isaiah 38:1-5. You read there, “In those days Hezekiah became ill and was at the point of death. The prophet Isaiah son of Amoz went to him and said, ‘This is what the Lord says: Put your house in order because you are going to die; you will not recover.’ Hezekiah turned his face to the wall and prayed to the Lord, ‘Remember, Lord, how I have walked before you faithfully with wholehearted devotion and have done what is good in your eyes.’ And Hezekiah wept bitterly. Then the word of the Lord came to Isaiah: ‘Go and tell Hezekiah, “This is what the Lord, God of your father David, says: I’ve heard your prayers and seen your tears; I will add fifteen years to your life. And I will deliver you and this city from the hand of king of Assyria. I will defend this city.”’” So at the announcement made to Hezekiah, “You’re going to die, you’re not going to recover,” Hezekiah prays to the Lord and the Lord responds and gives him an additional 15 years. So it does seem that in many instances there may be this conditional nature from predictive prophecy.

I think those are the two things that stand out. I cannot think of others besides repentance and prayer, which reinforces again the repentance part of it. Jeremiah 18:5-10 speaks explicitly about the prayer, and you have other examples of when Moses interceded for Israel. When the Lord says he’s going to do one thing, Moses prays and the Lord relents.

f. J. Barton Payne on Conditionality

J. B. Payne in his *Encyclopedia of Biblical Prophecy*, in a large introductory section, discusses a lot of issues of interpretation of prophetic material. He discusses this issue of conditionality of the biblical prophecy. In that discussion, he suggests that some limits should be put on conditionality lest all prophecy be rendered

uncertain of fulfillment. We see there's the hermeneutical danger behind it. If everything's conditional, then you can't be sure that anything's going to happen, particularly those things that stand at the heart of God's redemptive program. I think certainly there's a sense in which, and this is my addition to what Payne is suggesting, God's promise to Abraham in Genesis 12:3, "In your seed all the nations will be blessed," is not explicitly conditional on what any human being would do to ensure its fulfillment. That's going to happen with certainty. All nations of the earth will be blessed through the seed of Abraham because that is at the heart of God's redemptive purpose. There's nothing, I think, that any human being can do to alter that.

What Payne suggests is, and this is his own formulation, that for a prophecy to remain conditional it must meet two qualifications. One, it must be of near application. If you look at the examples, it fits. Jonah preaches to Nineveh, Isaiah's tell Hezekiah when he's going to die, Elijah tells Ahab how he will die. It must be a near application. Second, it must possess elements capable of satisfaction by the prophet's contemporary. In other words, these conditionals are not long-range prophecies that are part of the movement of God's redemptive program forward in accordance to the fulfillment of his plan and purpose.

So, I think that's probably helpful. I think we should recognize there is a potentially conditional aspect through any given prophecy, but as has been suggested those conditions are prayer and repentance. There is a contemporariness of the prophecy that could be fulfilled by the contemporaries of the prophet. It is a near application rather than long-term prophecy.

## 7. Kinds of Predictive Prophecy

### a. Direct Prediction

Let's go on to 7., "Kinds of predictive prophecy." What I have in mind under that heading is the distinction between what you might call direct prediction and typological prediction. Direct prediction consists of a prophetic statement that has

its fulfillment solely in the future. In other words, it's a verbal assertion of something that will happen in the future. You might look at Micah 5:2, which says, "But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you were small among the clans of Judah, out of you will come for me one who will be ruler over Israel, whose origins are from old, from ancient times." Then that's quoted in Matthew 2:5-6, as being fulfilled with Christ, who comes out of Bethlehem and becomes ruler of Israel. That's a statement, a verbal assertion.

#### b. Typological Prediction

A typological prediction is distinguished from direct prediction. A typological prediction is an institution, person or an event that finds its highest application of meaning in an institution, person or event of a later period in redemptive history. I'll repeat that. A typological prediction is an institution, person, or an event that finds its highest application of meaning in an institution, person or an event of a later period in redemptive history. For example, the Passover lamb finds its highest application of meaning in Christ himself. Or the serpent on the pole in the wilderness. In other words, typological prediction is accomplished by pre-figuring or imaging.

#### 1. John Stek's on Typology

Look at your citations page 24 under John Stek. In that first paragraph under John Stek's "Biblical Typology Yesterday and Today," he says, "In other words, a type is a historical reality which served a significant historical purpose within its own historical horizon (not merely a symbolic one), but it was also fashioned by Providence in such a way as to contribute to the larger purpose of God, namely, to reveal in successive stages and operations the very truths and principles which were to find in the realities of the gospel their move to complete manifestation." So in that sense, the type takes on the function of prophecy. It differs from direct prophecy, that is, a verbal assertion, in that it images or pre-figures, while the direct prophecy



asserts. It's verbal.

But I think when you reflect on the content of the Old Testament you will find there is a fair amount of typological significance in the Old Testament. There are things in the Old Testament that look forward to a fuller realization of the truth embodied in that Old Testament institution or event. The history of interpretation tells us that it's difficult to keep a proper perspective on the use of typological interpretation because there have been a lot of excesses and misuses of it. How far do we go with it? Some Old Testament realities are explicitly identified as being typological by statements in the New Testament, and there you have a very firm basis. But when you start going beyond that, how far can you go?

#### b. Mickelsen on Typology

If you look at page 24 under Mickelsen's *Interpreting the Bible* paragraph A, it says, "Often typology becomes an excuse for sensationalism in interpretation. Such sensationalism must be firmly repudiated by every honest interpreter. But if an interpreter, fully aware of the unity of the people of God, can show historical correlations while being aware of the differences between the type and the antitype, he certainly may observe such historical parallels. In such an activity the interpreter must discipline himself severely." In other words, Mickelsen and others I think correctly are saying you need not limit yourself only to those examples that are explicitly identified as typological by later biblical statements. You can go further than that, but you have to be careful lest you abuse this hermeneutical procedure.

The danger lies in the tendency toward allegory, and I think the way to avoid allegorical interpretation, where you can take almost anything and give it a spiritual significance, is to be certain that the correspondence between type and antitype retains oneness of meaning. In other words, it's the same truth that reappears at a later stage of the redemptive history but to a higher level. It's fuller revelation progresses where you have a truth embodied in some symbolical form in the earlier stage of redemption, and it reappears in later history. Who can draw that line

legitimately?

c. Vos on Typology

With that let me point you to page 25 because what I just is said really Vos' concept of typological interpretation where he establishes the connection between symbol and type and says that what is symbolized, that truth is the same truth that is typified. But notice he says, "In determining the function of the ceremonial law, we must take into consideration its two large aspects, the symbolic and the typical and the relation between the two. The same things were, looked at from the point of view, symbols, and from another point of view, types. A symbol is important in its religious significance something that profoundly portrays a certain fact, principle or relationship of a spiritual nature in a visible form. The things it pictures are of present existence and present application." In the next paragraph, "A typical thing is prospective." And then the following paragraph, "The things symbolized and the things typified are not different sets of things. They are in reality the same things, only different in this respect that they come first on a lower stage of development in redemption, and then again, in the later period, is on a higher stage." The middle of the next paragraph, "Only after having discovered what a thing symbolizes, can we legitimately proceed to put the question what it typifies, for the latter can never be caught else or else than the former lifted to a higher plane. The bond that holds type and antitype together must be a bond of vital continuity in the progress of redemption." So I think that is the issue—the correspondence between type and antitype. You might have the same truth in the symbol that reappears in the type of the later type.

Go back to page 23. Notice what Stek says there in that second paragraph. He is pointing out that God has so sovereignly ordered history that this correspondence between type and antitype is something that is by design. He says, "As the architect's models and sketches are controlled by his clear vision of the building which will someday serve his client's purpose, so the Lord of redemption history

ordains certain matters in the earlier dispensation which had their archetypes in the later.” I think that metaphor of the architect is a good metaphor. You might say that God is the architect of history. He sees the whole building and so he can build into the history these realities that are anticipating the reappearance of the same truth in other realities at a later stage of redemptive history. But you see type then becomes an important part of prophecy. It is to be looked at as a prophetic function every bit as much as direct prediction is, or direct verbal assertion.

#### d. Danger of Falling into Allegory

Now I said the danger is falling into allegory that loses the correspondence between type and anti-type being the same truth. Let me give you an illustration. Some of the old church fathers were heavy on allegory. Chrysostom said of Herod's slaughter of the infants in Bethlehem at the time of the birth of Christ, “The fact that only the children of two years old and under were murdered while those of three presumably escaped is meant to teach us that those who hold the Trinitarian faith will be saved whereas Binitarians and Unitarians will undoubtedly perish.” Now you see there you get, in my opinion, an abuse—you're falling into allegory. You're bringing meaning to a text that has absolutely nothing to do with the text itself. And it's that line that you don't want to cross, but it's that line that Vos protects against with the system that he suggests for abuse with typological interpretations.

#### Student Question:

Question: So with type we're speaking of situations, for instance, when the blood that was slain of the lamb in the Old Testament is the type pointing to Christ as his blood was slain?

Response: Yes, I think that's perfectly valid here—it's the same truth in the blood of a sacrifice, which is precisely what Christ's blood did. And as Hebrews points out, the blood of bulls and goats could not ultimately make the atonement. It was pointing forward to the blood of Christ that made it effective.

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