

# **Dr. Marv Wilson, Prophets, Session 5, Hermeneutical Principles for Understanding the Prophets**

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This is Dr. Marv Wilson in his teaching on the Prophets. This is session 5, Hermeneutical Principles for Understanding the Prophets.

All right, I'm ready to begin.

Let's have a word of prayer, please. Our Father, we thank You for the Prophets of Israel. Our Scriptures would certainly be incomplete without a knowledge of how they called people back to Your revelation, to how they called their own generation to accountability in justice, in ethics, as well as holding out hope that not only can there be in their generation renewal, but God's great plan in history indeed would have a deep and profound spiritual renewal.

We pray that we will always be people who have a message for our generation as well as a message of hope for the future. Thank You that our kingdom ultimately is a dynamic kingdom as You have broken into our lives and one which reaches beyond this life even to the life to come. For that we rejoice on this Friday morning through Christ our Lord.

Amen. All right, a couple of announcements just to remind you. There was a correction I made in the syllabus for the date of the final exam.

I think most if not all of you have made that correction. The final exam is May 16 on Monday at 2:30. Just make sure you've made that correction in the syllabus. Also, I had an email from the Academic Support Center indicating they are in need of a note keeper for this course.

Some of you could take notes and they would assume the cost of duplicating the notes and also pay somebody a small stipend if you would be willing to do that. Your name would be anonymous, but if you can help, go to the ASC and let them know that you are willing to do that. Today I'd like to introduce what I would call some hermeneutical principles, some interpretive principles for understanding the prophets and prophetic teaching.

I say hermeneutical principles because the prophets are not always easy to interpret. I remember I was teaching a class, I was in my mid-twenties, teaching a class on the prophets at Park Street Church in Boston. It was a ten-week Tuesday evening class.

I was teaching Jeremiah and Ezekiel. I was in my first year of graduate studies at the time at Brandeis University. A woman who attended Park Street called my mother.

She lived in the same town. She said, How come your son is teaching a course in the prophets? He didn't graduate, and she gave him the name of a famous evangelical seminary in the southwest. What does he know about the prophets? That's the only school that teaches the prophets.

While I will not mention that school, it has been famous for a hundred years or more, particularly for its theological journal and other things, as putting a lot of emphasis upon the future-istic parts of prophecy. The future of Israel and all of the wonderful things dealing with end times. This woman's problem was, I came from a seminary within a bike ride of where I give this lecture.

She said They don't teach prophecy there. What she was probably getting at was that particular seminary is not famous for unrolling charts and filling in all of the precise chronological details of the end times. There will be end times.

Eschatology is a viable and good subject for any book on Christian doctrine or systematic theology. There are a wide number of views out there. Some are very simple, clean, and uncomplicated.

Some very, very detailed, very, very literalistic, very, very worked out chronologically. Everything you need to know about getting ready for the end. Now, what I want to do in this section, some of the things I have to say deal with the prophets of Israel and what they were projecting for the future.

Other things I have to say deal with the prophets in a more general sense. But, in offering you some hermeneutical guidelines, when you study the prophets, I think there are some principles and some guidelines that you need to keep in mind broadly. Now, looking at evangelicalism, there have been mainly, not exclusively, but mainly two different approaches toward interpreting prophetic literature.

Particularly those parts of prophetic literature that involve futuristic events. One of those two schools is often described as a Reformed or Covenantal approach to prophecy, and the other, a so-called Dispensational approach to prophecy.

Toward the end of the 19th century and going especially into the 20th century, when you find the rise of the so-called Bible school or Bible institute movement, greatly influenced by the Schofield reference Bible, among a number of other things. And many of these Bible schools, very predictably, which pun intended, put a lot of emphasis on eschatology and prophecy conferences. I grew up in the Boston area.

I remember there would be churches and they would bring the president or the dean or somebody from the Bible department from one of these Bible colleges. Virtually all of these Bible colleges exist today. Many of them have moved into a more liberal

arts education rather than specifically being training institutes to launch people into the missions field and Christian vocations directly.

But you would talk about varieties of things dealing with the end times, the Antichrist, judgments, the Great Tribulation, the Rapture, the Great White Throne Judgment, the Thousand Year Reign of Christ on this Earth, the final climactic battle of history, Armageddon. And a lot of these kinds of emphases popularized the prophets in the churches among lay people. And, of course, other popular literature for the dispensational position, books like *The Late Great Planet Earth*, and now, in the last decade or two, the *Left Behind* series, which is a variation of this dispensational approach.

Just to give you the briefest of overviews so you can understand the distinction between these two views, which very much have dominated the thinking within the evangelical church. Basically, dispensationalism made or makes a distinction between Israel and the church. They are two separate entities.

Therefore, things that refer to biblical Israel are not gobbled up and spiritualized by a new Israel, i.e., the church, but they are only to be understood in very literalistic ways. So, dispensationalism has tended to hold to a literalistic interpretation of Old Testament prophecy. It focuses a lot on Israelology.

There is definitely an emphasis in Old Testament prophecy upon the future of Israel as seen in her being gathered from the nations of the earth, being restored to their land in preparation for the end times. And the Jewish people's regathering to the land, indeed, is one of the signs of the end. Dispensationalists also put an emphasis on other things associated with Israel's in-gathering, return.

Things like a rebuilt temple, which of course, looking at it from a human point of view, is a difficult thing. With two mosques right now up on the Temple Mount, how might one understand that possibility? Also, the idea of a revived priesthood, a revived sacrificial system, and the necessity to come up with a red heifer, as the Book of Numbers describes this animal that would be burned as part of the return to the sacrificial system. This system also talks about the appearance of this world ruler, the Antichrist at the end times, who makes a covenant with the Jewish people and then breaks it.

But out of all of this, there will be a physical, earthly, political kingdom established upon this earth where Jerusalem becomes very central, and Christ will reign and rule over the nations. This dispensational approach argues for the return of Jesus before all hell breaks loose before a period of tribulation breaks out on this earth. And so the idea of a seizing away, a snatching away of a rapture, would be a prelude to the final seven years, which dispensationalists often refer to as a time of Jacob's trouble.

But at the end of that seven-year period, Christ returns with the saints. He comes the first time for the rapture, which is for the saints. He comes after the seven years of tribulation with the saints.

And then there will be this reign and rule of Christ on earth. That essentially is the dispensational position. How that applies to Israel, of course, is that the word Israel itself means that Israel has its own separate program, which is to be distinguished from the church.

The covenantal approach, in contrast, is relatively simple. The covenantal approach, which is not exclusively but often has been coupled with a millennial thinking rather than the dispensationalist pre-millennial thinking, the covenantal approach sees the church as the new Israel. The millennial approach, or covenantal approach, sees Christ reigning and ruling and has been reigning and ruling throughout the whole history of the church.

It's already happening. It's an existential reality as Christ dynamically reigns and rules through His Holy Spirit in the church throughout the church age. Therefore, the details of any specific future for Israel, a return to the land, a restoration of sacrifices, usually none of these things are in any way understood literally.

Symbolically, they are part of understanding something that has replaced Israel, displaced Israel, in the plan of God. Namely, the church, which is a universal body scattered throughout the world focuses on Christ in His reign and His rule in the human heart. That's covenant theology.

So, covenant theology then focuses on Christology and spirituality and says this language about Israel's future is figurative and is not to be understood or pressed for the most part in any literal way. So, you don't expect any precise future for Israel. Many covenant theologians, reformed theologians, don't see an earthly future for Israel in the city of Israel or Jerusalem in the land of Israel any more than the Finland people, the Iceland people, or the Fiji people have a future.

There's a new Israel and therefore this language has become reinterpreted in light of the church. Alright, here then are broadly two different points of view. The raising of the question of how we understand the future of Israel in the church, you often hear these words thrown around.

Are you pre-mill? Are you post-mill? Are you an a-mill? Your generation does not put so much emphasis on this as my generation. Nevertheless, you ought to know where the word millennium comes from. The word millennium is made up of two Latin words.

The first part of it meaning a thousand and annum, the Latin for year. So, millennium means a thousand years. There's only one place in the Bible where that thousand years is mentioned.

That happens to be Revelation chapter 20. And it mentions that Satan would be bound for a thousand years and would eventually, after a thousand years, be released for a short period of time. It talks about the dead who come to life and reign with Christ for a thousand years.

Revelation 20, verse 4. The rest of the dead did not come to life until the thousand years were ended. So, pre-millennialists who believe that there will be a literal reign of Christ on this earth would say there are two resurrections—one for believers who are there reigning and ruling with Christ.

And then one after the millennium when others are raised from the dead and then are judged. So, he says, blessed and holy are those who have part in the first resurrection. The second death has no power over them for they will be priests of God and of Christ and will reign with him for a thousand years.

When the thousand years are over, Satan will be released from his prison. And then it speaks about the nations coming to this great battle of Gog and Magog. The mother of all battles.

Is this the same as Armageddon? Is it a different battle? But, Revelation speaks of these final events. Of course, Gog and Magog is taken from the latter chapters of Ezekiel 38 and 39. Which are then built on in the book of Revelation.

What am I saying then? There are three different views of a thousand year reign. I just read you the one place in the Bible where it speaks of Christ having a thousand-year reign on this earth--Revelation 20.

A reign with God's people. Now, pre-millennial dispensationalists would hold to that point. And pre-millennial non-dispensationalists would hold to that point.

Namely, Christ will return to this earth and physically reign and rule from Jerusalem. The post-millennial position is a very simple position. It's perhaps the least popular among evangelical Christians.

But, at earlier times in church history, it had varying degrees of popularity—post-millennial, meaning after the millennium. The post-millennial position says there will be a gradual social change until a great, enlightened, spiritually emergent society comes about over hundreds and hundreds of years of preaching the gospel.

In short, post-millennialism argues for the gradual leavening effect that Christianity will have on the earth. Christian missions is a very important emphasis of the post-millennial positions. It will be strong as the message of Christianity reaches across the earth.

From generation to generation, the world will gradually accept Jesus as the Messiah as this new world is conquered not by weapons but by the power of the Spirit. After this new world is built, the Messiah will come. So this spiritual Messiah, or spiritual society, is going to emerge after many generations of preaching the gospel.

Opponents of this post-millennial approach argue the world is going to get better and better because the power of the gospel is going to transform human hearts around the world; the opponents of that view say, you have too optimistic a view of human nature. You don't know how sin has captured the hearts of people. You ought to believe in total depravity.

It would give you a more realistic view that there's going to be a lot of stubborn resistance out there. And so, it's too man-centered in the end. It depends upon the church going out there.

But the corruption of the human heart in society and the resistance to the preaching of the gospel is not really going to permit this to happen. It's too man-centered in the end. It's too optimistic a view of humans and society.

Others also have some problems with the fact we live in a pluralistic world. You have more than a billion Muslims out there who have a parallel agenda. It's Allah's will that the whole world submits to Islam.

And the Christian system comes along and says, no, the whole world will submit to Christ. And so, the power of the Holy Spirit to change the hearts of people will result in this. In a pluralistic world, how far, potentially, would the gospel have to go before the end in this vision that the world will be, quote, Christianized?

And there will be a Christendom that emerges from this gradual social change as the whole world becomes enlightened through the proclamation of the gospel. Or some of my Jewish friends would say to me, suppose we resist the Christian agenda if the whole world is to be Christianized. And then Christ comes after this thousand-year period, which would be taken then as a symbolic period of time as the preaching of the gospel goes out.

What happens if push comes to shove? All right, so there's the post-millennial view. The amillennial view which particularly is something that was articulated by Augustine in the 5th century and by many others from particularly that time onward. Says there's no millennium--Amillennium.

So, therefore, this reign and rule in the human heart of Christ which has been going on and will continue to go on until the end times. So, the Jewish people then and whatever the prophetic text says about Israel it's to be reinterpreted because the church is the second stage of the salvation rocket.

The first stage has fizzled out. And been replaced by a new spiritually enlightened Israel. And so, therefore, the concrete, earthly, geopolitical emphases in the Old Testament prophets cancelled.

God is not going to reign from Jerusalem someday. He's really only interested in reigning and ruling in individual lives. All right, so here are a number of different points of view.

I would say, certainly, for a number of decades now, because of the cross-fertilization of covenant theologians with dispensational theologians and the conversations that they have had, dispensationalism has been gradually changing and gradually opening to a much more progressive point of view where the kingdom of God, instead of being something which would be understood as futuristic and in Jerusalem, more and more has become understood as having possibilities in the spiritual realm. Where the amillennialist has been listening to the dispensationalist more and more, the amillennialist has been open to the possibilities of some kind of physical or earthly manifestation that God may yet have for his ancient people. And while there are probably as many views out there as there are believers, the reason for this is these are rather complex issues.

For me, and I'll just tell you how I have gone about this, I was raised in a fire-breeding dispensationalist church where I was taught all of the answers about Israel's future. Not only were they found in the Bible itself, but all the notes in the Bible that our pastor used from the pulpit clarified what was already. The interpretation was already baked into the Bible. So the notes just clarified what Scripture clearly taught.

Then I went to a seminary where many of those views were challenged by a more covenantal and Reformed amillennial approach. One of the things you have to learn about theology is you really need to hear many, many voices in theology. Because there's a conversation The distinctive thing about Jewish interpretation of Scripture, is it's not system it's not one answer, but it's dialogical, it's conversational, or it's what Jews refer to as holding things in tension as commentary.

Rabbi so-and-so says this, and Rabbi so-and-so says this. And so, you balance by going back and forth the understanding of various of these teachings. So, I've learned a lot from both of those sides.

I've spent a lot of time reflecting on this myself. And I'll tell you where I am at. I cannot personally believe that everything God taught for nearly 2,000 years, from Abraham till Jesus the moment the church was born and the leaders of the earliest church all being Jews, and keep in mind you couldn't get in that church for the first 20 years of it unless you were Jewish.

From A.D. 29 to A.D. 49, the church was a movement within Judaism. It was called the Nazarene movement, as the book of Acts tells us. And if you wanted to be part of the Jesus movement, you had to convert to Judaism to be part of it until, of course, the council of Jerusalem in Acts 15 said, yeah, Gentiles may join Jews.

Here are the sensitivities that must be preserved. So, it was a movement within Judaism. What I am simply saying is that for nearly 2,000 years, God was working through a particular people.

And I cannot see the Apostle Paul saying all the promises God made to my ancestors in the flesh, ethnic, national, physical, and Jewish people. There is a new entity now that all of those promises about an eternal covenant, about a land which is part of a Berit Olam an eternal covenant, all of that is called off now. God's changed His mind. No.

You read what Paul says in Romans 9-11 and I had this self-imposed thing. I wanted to read Romans 9-11 to see what Jew and Gentile and the plan of God were about after hearing both of these two main systems presented to me as part of my spiritual pilgrimage. I read Paul in Romans 9-11 speaking of Israel not to them were the covenants.

He uses the present tense in Greek. To them are the covenants. In fact, Paul says in Romans 11 that the coming of faith of Gentiles is in God's sovereign plan to evoke envy, to provoke jealousy to God's physical earthly people because Israel physically continues even though branches have been cut off because of unbelief God is able to graft them in again.

Paul also says Israel, while in the flesh, his ancient kinsmen are still beloved for the sake of the patriarchs. They are still a holy people set apart for God's purposes. Paul didn't understand eschatology any more than you and I did.

In fact, at the end of Romans 9-11, after saying the deliverer will come out of Zion someday, banish all ungodliness from Jacob, and so all Israel will be saved contextually, he's certainly referring to the people of Israel in the flesh, whether it's cumulative of all time or whether we'll be seeing his believing at a moment when Christ may return in the future. But after he says the climax of Israel is yet to come associated with this deliverer that comes out of Zion. Brings a few verses together from the book of Isaiah.



Then after he says Israel's end physically is going to be the way it began physically. There was a corporate election that happened at Sinai. Now, there's a corporate culmination.

The details of which Paul didn't get. He throws up his hands at the end of Romans 11 and says, oh, the wisdom of this mystery of God, which I don't grasp.

But Paul believed in his own countrymen because God did not revoke the promises. God would still remain true to the promises. Now there are promises in the Old Testament to physical Israel, which do get expanded in the New Testament and include the church.

Make no mistake about that. Where in the Old Testament, Israel is denoted in a precise Jewish context, in the New Testament, Gentiles are joining Jews, and so often, the idea or the principle or the connotation is stressed as an expanded version of Israel is made because Abraham was to have other children.

I just cannot believe in Galatians 3:29 if the moment you say yes to Christ three-quarters of the Bible are canceled out. No. When you say yes to Christ says Paul to the Galatians, if you belong to Christ, you are Abraham's seed.

To be part of Abraham's seed, you cannot be indifferent to Abraham's people, Abraham's land, or the things that God promised that patriarch. And so, I think the solution to the problem of Israel, in part, has to involve the proper methodology. What is the proper methodology? While the relation between Israel and the church or Israel and her future, I think, is complex, the solutions historically in the church have resulted in some very unquestionable understanding of Scripture.

Why? In the second century, up on the Black Sea, there was a father of the church called Martian. Martian said the God of the Old Testament, thank you very much; we don't need anymore. Throw this God of the Jewish people, throw them out.

And so, he wanted to jettison really the Hebrew Bible from the canon of Christianity. Because he saw the God as a different God. So, Israel, indeed, was not taken seriously.

Israel was basically dissed and trashed by Marcions. Thankfully, he was hauled into Rome and condemned as a heretic in 144 because that would have been a disastrous result for the Old Testament for the church. Now there are vestiges or pockets of Neo-Marcionism in the church today.

If you go to a church where you have to wait several months before you get an Old Testament sermon, it may be there's a little Neo-Marcionism at work there. If you go

to a theological seminary where Greek is required, and Hebrew is optional or not offered at all, you may smell possibly Neo-Marcionism at work. A second approach historically in the early Christian centuries especially, the church fathers came along, and they wanted to allegorize these great prophecies about Israel.

Anything to do with Israel's future, particularly God's blessing and pouring out of His Spirit and grace and mercy and expressions of His love, we'll take it. That's the message of the prophets for the church. And the church fathers, what did they do? They tended to allegorize symbolic meaning in the Old Testament or they found Christological meaning in the prophets.

That's how they saved parts of the Old Testament. But those parts of the Old Testament get their meaning now in the church. Then a third approach, the cherry-picking approach, which many in the church have followed over the centuries, not exactly knowing what to do with Israel.

They look at the Old Testament, and they take those laws, those teachings, and those materials that they believe are compatible with Christianity, and they tend to ignore everything else based on some qualitative judgment that they make whether this will work. I think our solution of interpreting prophetic literature hermeneutically, we should do what the early church did. I think the early church had a bias, and that bias was since they were all Jews, they knew God's work among their people for 2,000 years.

They celebrated the heroes of the faith that you and I do in the book of Hebrews. They're all Old Testament characters. And so, their bias was nothing in the New Testament can contradict what's found in the Old Testament.

It may build on it, it may expand it, it may enlarge its meaning, but it's not going to contradict it. All Scripture is given by God and is profitable. Says Paul to Timothy, primarily referring to the Old Testament.

Every major council of the church has said all 66 books are fully inspired and fully authoritative in the life of the church. The church historically has viewed the Old Testament as Holy Scripture. The question is how do we use it and what's our methodology going to be so we acknowledge it as Scripture rather than make a preemptive strike and trash it before we open it.

We don't need it anymore if it's only propaedeutic, a springboard to get us into the New Testament. Then who needs it anymore? A lot of this thinking is born out of the idea, you see, that God's plan A failed. Keep the law, bring animal sacrifices, and get circumcised.

I'll give it a run for a couple of thousand years. Oh, Israel really failed miserably. Now I'm going to come up with a better way.

We're going to call this thing the New Testament. We're going to scrap plan A and now this thing is going to be filled with love and grace and faith and mercy. We've got a better way.

So that earlier stuff, if it exists, the only reason it's there is to show the failure and why we needed this new stuff. That's a view that a lot of people sadly have about the Old Testament rather than seeing it as inspired Scripture. The earliest church had the Psalms as their hymn book.

That was Holy Scripture. You couldn't be admitted to the highest order of clergy in Augustine's day in the 5th century without committing to memorize all 150 Psalms. You had to know them by heart.

That's the Hebraic heritage. I think the solution to this is you don't do what the church fathers did because their point of departure was the New Testament, and they look back at the Old Testament. That's what Martian sadly did.

He started with the New, looked back on the Old, and said not for me. Hermeneutically, we should do what the early church did. They only had one Bible.

They only had the Old Testament. That was their starting point. You have to go to the 4th century AD before you have a complete listing of all 27 books circulating as a canon of Scripture.

Basically, in the first few centuries of the church, the Old Testament played a mighty big role. It was not always used correctly as Scripture. As the church more and more got the numbers and became Gentile, the Jewish voice became more and more marginalized in that church.

In the synagogue, in the church, the church eventually went to a parting of the ways, which seems to have been finalized by at least Justin Martyr's time in the middle of the 2nd century. Although we know from other evidence in church history, there were still Jews hanging on in the synagogue until the 4th century. What I suggest we do then with the early church, you start with the Old Testament rather than the New Testament.

This is the Word of God. After you do your exegesis and your study of the Old Testament, it forces you to take the Old Testament seriously. Not as preparatory for the New, and the only thing I get out of it is, oh, I understand now why God had to have a New Testament because these people were terrible.

They were failures. I can understand why God needed a better way. Sorry, that's your family, my family, and the early church's family.

Those are the heroes of the faith. And so, you start with the Old Testament, which the early church only had one Bible. That's what it had to do.

Then, the apostolic writings started to make midrash, commentary, and interpretive understandings under the guidance of the Holy Spirit on those Old Testament Scriptures. Today, we call them the apostolic writings or the New Testament, but new does not mean brand new like a new car. It means God is renewing things again.

And so you start with the Old, which hopefully means you're going to take the Old very, very seriously. Does God have a further word on that Scripture in the New Testament? Your final step is once again to go back to the Old, taking that New Testament reflection on some of the Old Testament, not all by any means, and then see what the solution might be. I think it was a given.

Even when Jesus is asked, will you at this time restore to us the kingdom? Acts 1. Jesus didn't say, man, where did you get this idea of a kingdom? What? What are you talking about? Where did that idea ever come from? No, He simply said it's not for you to know the when the timing. Jesus could have taken one of those moments to spiritualize the whole concept of the kingdom right there. But He doesn't.

So, I think as I will do in Monday's lecture, show there's reason to pause about pressing many of the details of biblical prophecy in the future. But it seems that if we take the approach of the earliest church, we're forced. These are my people, Paul says.

God has been at work with them. Does He cancel them all out? Now all of a sudden? There's a lot of language also in the Old Testament that is geopolitical. The notion of a Messiah.

What does a Messiah do? He's a warrior figure. He's a king figure. He's a ruler figure.

That's physical. Earthly. And while Jesus did not come to fulfill it in that precise way, the notion of the second coming, many of those themes seem to be realized on this earth when they are ultimately worked out.

So, the kingdom is sort of a two-phase spiritual already, but there's that not yet. And that does not yet brings particularly a lot of these Old Testament prophecies into the range of we will yet see them realized in some future day, in my opinion. Alright, with that, I'm going to end.

This is Dr. Marv Wilson in his teaching on the prophets. This is session 5, Hermeneutical Principles for Understanding the Prophets.