

Dr. Marv Wilson, Prophets, Session 6, Hermeneutical Principles for Understanding the Prophets, Part 2

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This is Dr. Marv Wilson in his teaching on the Prophets. This is session 6, Hermeneutical Principles for Understanding the Prophets, Part 2.

Alright, I'm ready to get started. Let's have prayer before we begin the class. We look to You, Lord, many times every day to acknowledge that You are our GPS. We fall off the highway, the road, the derek of life many times, even into cul-de-sacs and into the ditch, but we thank You that You call us back to get back on the main boulevard of life and to keep walking. We thank You that that is our calling, that that road is leading us to somewhere.

We thank You that the Hebrew Scriptures are goal-oriented, that they lead us to the belief that the injustices and unrighteousness and failures and lack of to achieve peace in this life are only temporary setbacks. Indeed, ultimately, we will experience the dream of the Old Testament prophets of the world being covered with the knowledge of God as the waters cover the sea. Indeed, that warfare will cease and that Your shalom will spread over all humanity.

With that vision, we thank You that You have called us to be people of reconciliation, justice, and hope. So, might that vision of the prophets characterize our individual lives in our own personal worlds this day? I pray this through Christ our Lord. Amen.

Alright, do you have any questions, comments, anything you'd like to ask from my last lecture? Let me give you that opportunity. Alright, we are talking about some of the broad guidelines, the hermeneutical principles to help us make good sense of the prophets. Interpreting the Scriptures correctly is much more like a wrestling match than a science.

It's far more the ability to have a sensitivity to certain kinds of things. Indeed, it is far more an art than it is a science. And so, it's not a matter of applying 1, 2, 3, A, B, C, and you always get the same answer.

Alright, last time, I talked about some broad orientations toward how people in the church have viewed the question of Israel, particularly in futuristic, prophetic discourses. As I've said many times, the bulk of prophetic teaching deals with the here and the now. The prophets were social reformers.

They were concerned with their own society. But that was always balanced with an idealism that what was seen in the present was only temporary in the grand scheme of things. That ultimately, God, through His Messiah, would reign.

Now, looking at the narrative of biblical prophecy, I want to come to another principle. The last time, I said, I think the way we want to do this is to start with the Old Testament, then go to the New Testament, and if God has a further word of revelation or teaching, then we can bring that back to our understanding of the Old Testament. But I really feel we do the Old Testament injustice, and typically, in the history of the church, it has been given injustice if our methodology is not the methodology of the earliest church.

You start with the Jewish scriptures, which are a word from the Lord in their own right, and if God has additional things that He wants to shed on that, do so. But here, the original word, in its own context, in its own setting, in its own testament. The next principle is to keep in mind that much of prophecy is poetry.

We're not dealing with a straightforward historical narrative. Indeed, about a third of the whole Old Testament is poetry. Remember the old maxim: the Hebrews were wordsmiths.

And being wordsmiths, anything worth saying was worth saying beautifully. And so the propensity in a very oral culture was to say things so they would be memorable. And so the parallel lines of poetry, the assonance, the use of sibilance, the onomatopoeic expressions, the similes, the metaphors, all remind us where we're dealing with figures of speech, and we're dealing often with oriental hyperbole.

Even Father Abraham, whom the Bible describes as a nabi/navi, as a prophet, three times in the Abrahamic narrative, God describes what the descendants of Avraham, father of the many, would be. He says, they'll be like the stars of the heavens, they'll be like the sand on the seashore, and they'll be like the dust on the earth. There are three descriptions to say Abraham's going to have many children.

Now, you and I are part of that expanded Abrahamic family, not through the natural seed, the physical seed, but through the spiritual seed. But there is a very indefinite picture that there'll just be a lot of them using that kind of figurative language. Well, that's typical of much of the material in the prophets.

The language, therefore, lacks the precision that one might find in a straightforward historical narrative. So, we need to factor that in. The Hebrew is painting word pictures with the language, and is not so much interested in precision very often as helping us get the broader concept.

Another point that's important when we study prophetic literature is to keep in mind at the end of the day, it is person-centered, not event-centered. One of the problems, I think, that the dispensational approach to understanding prophecy has had since its inception has very often been to set forth and chart a sequential series of events in a precise order. And so great debates would happen about why the Lord has to come before the tribulation, rather than, as the man for whom Ferren Hall is named on campus, he was a mid-tribulationist.

The Lord's coming after three and a half years. Right dab smack in the middle of the seven-year period called the time of Jacob's trouble. And then one of Gordon's most illustrious alumni, whose major, whose main focus of life was eschatology and the kingdom of God, George Ladd, who has a book in our library here saying the Lord's coming after the tribulation after the seven-year period is over.

So you have such a variety of viewpoints out there and people can get up lots of energy, lots of argumentation, lots of debate about the time of these things where the Bible's focus is not on the when so much as the who. Eschatology focuses primarily on a person.

It's what Advent is all about. And when you take the three New Testament words that focus about the climax of that which the Old Testament prophets wrote, they all concern a person. Epiphania, the manifestation or the appearance of Christ.

Parousia, literally to be alongside, may be translated as arrival. The parousia, the arrival of Christ, the second coming. And then, of course, the third word, apocalypse, which is the revelation.

The revelation of the Son of God from heaven. So that emphasis, which in 1 John in that little letter toward the end of the New Testament, we will see Him as He is, and everyone who has that hope in himself purifies himself even as he is pure. So, what hope? The hope of His coming.

Eschatology, then, is very much person-centered, not event-centered. And you may be with the wrong company if they spend too much time discerning how close to the end we are rather than talking about what the New Testament calls the blessed hope. That was the title that George Ladd, one of the most balanced evangelical eschatologists of the 20th century, used for the title of one of his books, *The Blessed Hope and Glorious Appearing of our Savior Jesus Christ*.

Okay, that is the blessed hope. It's wrapped up in a person, Christ. Another emphasis I want to make when you get into the genre of biblical prophecy, how we interpret prophecy should never become a test for fellowship.

Now this may sound very strange to some of you. But when I was completing my graduate study and was looking around for places where I might teach, there was a particular theological seminary that came to mind and I looked in their catalog of studies and their statement of faith. And they had some very precise things from the Hebrew Bible, from our Old Testament prophetic materials.

One which maybe many of you have never heard of is the 70 weeks of Daniel. And you had to understand that a particular way to be on the theological faculty. That's going a little bit too far, in my opinion.

Not just for theological faculties, but if people are going to have statements that bind believers together in local fellowships. Again, Augustine's dictum is very good. It should not be forgotten wherever you go.

In essentials unity, in non-essentials liberty, but in all things charity. In essentials unity, in non-essentials liberty, but in all things charity. The issue comes is, what are the essentials? And I would say that in the history of the church, just as our Jewish friends see the climax of the whole story of the Hebrew Bible, of an age of righteousness, peace, and reconciliation on this earth, associated with an end-times figure called the Messiah.

So, Christians think about the same thing. How we understand the specifics of these things is not all that important. In fact, they often become schismatic.

Or, as Harnack used to say, the church is all zerspelten, all split up, fragmented. Sometimes over what I would call minor points of doctrine. Points about which numerous very sincere believers have differences on how they interpret or read certain texts.

So, how we interpret prophecy should not be a test for fellowship. We should lay out our belief system, I believe, as Christians, in the simplest of terms: the simply personal, visible return of Christ in glory at the end of the age. That pretty much says the essential, historical, evangelical, orthodox, basic commitment that binds us together.

Now, if you want to start adding points and sub-points under that, then that can become problematic. So, it should not be a test for fellowship. I think belief in the resurrection might be part of the charismatic package that you put together.

That is, what did the early church proclaim and herald as a community of faith? What were the essential core elements of the Gospel message as found in 1 Corinthians 15, 3, and 4? How that Christ died for our sins, was buried, and rose again on the third day according to the Scriptures. Or as Paul speaks in Romans, about how he is

declared to be the Son of God with power through the resurrection of the dead. And if you confess that Jesus has died and risen again, you will be saved.

I think the resurrection, historically for the Christians, from the New Testament, has been part of an end times package associated with the future. Because that accompanies the return of Christ. As 1 Thessalonians says.

So, 1 Thessalonians was written in part to comfort early believers. Some of whom felt they had a failed movement. Jesus had died, but yet there was that hope of reunion.

Those who had died and were then sleeping would be raised when Christ returned from heaven. Alright, this is the hope—the soon return of Christ.

That's the eschaton, and it's person-centered. Other things we should study. They are important to flesh out the larger picture.

But you don't dis-fellowship somebody because we have disagreements concerning events related to the end times or when Christ might return—another point on hermeneutics. Remember, the New Testament sometimes reinterprets Old Testament texts in ways that the first believers may have not always initially understood.

Paul could reflect back on the Torah and the journey his ancestors, and by the way, your ancestors and my ancestors. Don't forget when you read 1 Corinthians chapter 10. It's not the Jewish people who came through the waters of the Red Sea.

It's the ancestors of everyone in the church, Jew and non-Jew. Our forefathers, Paul writes to the Corinthians. So, when our forefathers came through the waters of the Red Sea and started wandering down the Sinai Peninsula and needed water because it was a parched and a dry land, and got water from the rock, Paul says, that rock was Christ.

He had this very intuitive, exegetical sense to him where he saw that whole storyline pointing to Christ who could slake spiritual thirst. That one who said he had the water of life, or living water, to use the words of John's Gospel. And so, we have some of these surprise moments.

Probably the original writers of some of these texts had little understanding how a larger reading of these texts would be carried on. Another example is Romans chapter 9, verses 24-26. We'll be talking about Hosea in a few lectures.

And here, Paul says, even us whom he also called, not only from the Jews but also from the Gentiles. As he says in Hosea, I will call them my people who are not my people. I will call her my beloved who is not my beloved.

And it will come to pass that in the very place where it was said to them, i.e., Israel, you are not my people, they will be called sons of the living God. The idea, the connotation, and the principle of a forgiving, restoring, and saving God is now applied to Gentiles. But the original context, when you look at that in Hosea, is not talking about Gentiles at all.

It's talking about national, physical, earthly Israel, who in the northern kingdom was idolatrous, pursuing Baal worship. And God talks about the severing of His relationship temporarily with His people. And so, but then His love is eternal.

He takes them back and He restores them. So, the general principle, i.e. connoting, rather than denoting or being explicit, which is the context of Hosea. The writer of the New Testament goes for a broader idea rather than sticking specifically with the context of an application of Hosea's own earthly people, Israel.

So, Paul extends that principle. How the New Testament writers use Old Testament texts may end up being in the judgment of modern 20th and 21st century writing an exegesis paper as being strained, difficult, and unsupportive. That's not what the text seems to be saying.

But as John Bright says, as you read John Bright, if you've ever read John Bright in *The Authority of the Old Testament*, he says in that book, you know, God's use of those writers through the Holy Spirit sometimes transcends and goes beyond what we would call good normative principles of doing biblical exegesis. So, you can, therefore, not question the Holy Spirit's motive. If the Holy Spirit told Paul that rock in the wilderness is Christ, then it's Christ because I have an authoritative New Testament commentary on that incident in the wilderness.

But again, that's very typical of the big picture. The desire of every writer in the New Testament to see this story reaching its climax. These types of shadows and patterns of the Old Testament are now being gathered together in one big storyline.

And so, we can see that extension of the meaning of these texts. The prophecy of Joel 2, which we'll look at. Joel was the prophet of Pentecost.

Why? When Peter gets up and gives that sermon on the day the church is born in Acts 2, he quotes Joel 2 about God pouring out His Spirit on all flesh. Well, who made up the audience there? The audience there, at least we know from Acts 2, that responded specifically to Peter's message were his fellow Jewish countrymen. 3,000 of them were dunked in the mikveh, or they dunked themselves.

Probably the ones you see now at the western wall. The southwest part of the Temple Mount. That all flesh, though the original hearers of Joel were obviously Jews who heard that message.

But the application of that message, Joel is saying, this is it. It would be 20 or more years later before the Gentiles, technically, the non-Jews, the all flesh, who would be responding as they would come into the olive tree connection as wild olive branches now grafted into Israel. So, it began then, and so we have to see it probably much more as a progressive work.

So, the New Testament sometimes reinterprets certain Old Testament texts. And certainly, that was true of the Messiah, wasn't it? The popular expectation when Jesus came was far more of a warrior, hero, military champion, and political figure. That obviously was what people existentially wanted because they were writhing under the heel of Rome.

When Jesus had the audacity to say, my kingdom is not of this world, people probably scratched their heads and said, what kind of a Messiah are you? This is not the kind of Messiah we read about in the Hebrew Bible. And yet Jesus did come in some way as a Messiah, but not the Messiah that the masses were expecting because He was not a bombastic outward coup, but rather it was an invasion inwardly of the human heart. Turn around because the kingdom of God is present.

God's rule and reign is here. So, while the New Testament affirms Jesus is the Messiah, at least in His first coming, people were forced to think about some of these things in even radically different ways than they initially thought. So, there may be some surprises.

The next point I want to make, in no particular order in points I'm making about understanding prophecy but I would have a healthy suspicion about date setting, long charts, a kind of dogmatism, an unwarranted dogmatism, and things that, at the end of the day, may be reduced far more to speculation than sound exegesis. I told you about that fearful night in the city of Boston in the 1840s when William Miller had set the exact date for the Lord's return. Now, we do have groups out there today that use the words Advent, Seventh-day Adventist, and Advent Christian.

The word Advent is a reminder the Lord is coming. By the way, people were speculating at the time when William Miller tried to set that date of the Lord's return because New England had one of its worst winters on record, and people were kind of speculating. Also, there was a tremendous meteorite shower that happened very close to this event, so there were a lot of people who were contemplating if this could be the end of the age. Well, a few of these failed events should create a healthy skepticism of those who are so certain about when the Lord is going to return.

Some of you have parents and grandparents that will tell you when 1988 came, that was exactly 40 years after the founding of the state of Israel. And we had a nationally known evangelist, in fact, he has his own cable television program. You can see him every day here at Gordon College.

It still is on. He came to Gordon College and spoke in a convocation. While he was not asked specifically to teach on the last things, the temptation was too much.

I remember specifically hearing him say that Russia was going to make its move, and Syria was going to make its move. He said that all of these things in the Middle East were coming into play because this was one generation. According to the Olivet Discourse of Jesus, Matthew 24, Luke 21, and Mark 13, all these things are going to happen.

These are things associated with the end of the age. As Jesus puts it precisely in one text, this generation will not pass away until these things are seen, things associated with His second coming.

So, speculation was high for that particular period of time. The state of Israel was founded in 1948, forty years later, in 1988.

Same kind of thing happened, of course, in the year 2000. All kinds of peoples speaking. All kinds of self-anointed prophets showing up in Jerusalem with their gowns.

Claiming street corners, passing out tracks. Proclaiming the end. It was the year 2000, after all.

Like the boy that was called Wolf. Wolf. Wolf.

Wolf. We have to be very, very careful about that. Another principle of prophecy.

Prophecy, particularly prophecy that concerns foreign nations. Not so much messianic prophecy, but many of these prophecies are conditional. They're not written or chiseled in marble.

God considers the human response. Your textbook by Abraham Joshua Heschel on the prophets has a caption. Discussion for a page and a half.

It says no word is God's last word. And there Heschel unpacks this notion that when a prophet might say something like forty days in the interval, will be destroyed. There's always a P.S. associated with that.

By the way, if you happen to repent, we're calling off this Oracle of Doom that has been pronounced about Nineveh. That P.S., if you repent, it may change the outcome of the message that's just been delivered. There's a classic biblical text associated with the fact that many of these prophecies are conditional on how a people respond.

Jeremiah 18:7 through 10. Let me read that passage. Jeremiah 18, starting with verse 7. If at any time I announce, this is God speaking, that a nation or a kingdom is to be uprooted, torn down, and destroyed, and if that nation, I warned, repents of its evil, then I will relent.

I will back off. I like the word relent in the NIV, which I think is much clearer than the King James repent. The notion of God repenting is a lot more problematic for us to understand.

So, God says He will relent and not inflict on it the disaster I had planned. Why? because the nation that was warned turns around and changes its behavior. Then, in verse 9, He says the other side of that.

If at another time I announce that a nation or a 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 intended to do for it. Alright, this notion of the conditional nature of prophecy. So, we should not think of prophecy as this static; it's going to happen regardless of word because human response, Scripture indicates, can in some way affect the outcome of that prophecy.

Another principle I want to mention, typically the prophets of the Old Testament did not distinguish between the first and the second comings of Christ. From the Old Testament prophetic point of view, they peered into the future; they looked way out there into the distance, and from their perspective, if they were standing here in the Old Testament and looking out there, the two mountain peaks looked like one from where they stood. The first mountain peak refers to the first coming, the day of the Lord inaugurated in the coming of Christ, and the second peak, the day of the Lord consummated.

What does the day of the Lord mean? Well, the way it's used in the New Testament, the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night. That, of course, has reference to the second coming of Christ. But from an Old Testament perspective, God was simply going to come and visit history to judge evil on this earth, to punish the enemies that have defied Him, and then secondly, to vindicate His own people, to rescue them, to work His final work of salvation for them.

From an Old Testament perspective, it was not always seen as being two phases of a single act; when you look at John the Baptist, or John the Mikvah man, as Stephen

Weiland likes to call him, in his book on the Jews at the time of Jesus. John is the one who is involved in this preparation for the Messiah. In Matthew chapter 3, and Matthew's the guy who loves to make those links between Old Testament prophetic texts and the coming of Jesus, this Matthean community was filled with Jews who loved to hear, as Matthew 1.1 and 1.2 says, the gospel of the genealogy of Yeshua HaMashiach, Ben David, Ben Avraham.

And what does Matthew 1.2 say? Abraham. Matthew 1.1 mentions Abraham. Matthew 1.2 mentions Abraham.

And David is the first human being linked to Jesus in that genealogy. And the Matthean community wanted to hear that. That was an important link.

Now, as John comes to prepare the way, John says, in typical prophetic language, you brood of vipers, excoriating language, sound like the prophets of Israel, moral, spiritual, heralds of righteousness, you generation of vipers, who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? Produce fruit in keeping with repentance. John's baptism was a baptism of repentance. Do not think you can say to yourselves, we have Abraham as our father.

It's not a matter of descent, physical descent, or natural descent. John says there's more to it. You need to live like Father Abraham.

Live righteously. Live in faith and obedience. So, he says, I tell you that out of these stones, God can raise up children for Abraham.

The axe is already at the root of the tree. Very dramatic. Very much in the sense of the oracles of the Old Testament prophets.

And every tree that does not produce fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire. I baptize you with water for repentance. But after me comes someone who is more powerful, whose sandals I'm not even fit to carry.

He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire. Now this is the text that follows that I want to mention, particularly verse 12, Matthew 3.12. His winnowing fork is in his hand. This is Jesus.

And he will clear his threshing floor, gathering his wheat into the barn and burning up the chaff with unquenchable fire. That language is obviously not what you read in the Gospels that Jesus accomplished on his mission the first time around. The language there has to be redirected to his second coming when he comes to judge, to purify, and finalize the work he began.

And just as you have to read the New Testament with postponed eschatology, if you will, so you have to do that in the Old Testament. Because sometimes the writers of the Old Testament write of the first coming. Sometimes, they write off the second coming.

But they viewed this whole thing as God's visitation in history to judge as well as to claim, to restore, and to in many ways seal that work which he began among the righteous and the elect. To affirm them before the nations. So, the prophets can speak of either coming.

And they did not always make that distinction. So, you can see things are not always precise. There's another principle.

Be careful not to read predictive prophecy deterministically or overly deterministically, or in any fatalistic way. Say you're a person who believes that the Bible teaches Israel has a right to their national homeland. It's baked into the Torah.

There's a real estate deed there. Why? Because God said to Father Abraham in the early part of the Genesis narratives, I will give you and your descendants this land as part of the Berit Olam, an eternal covenant. And that land is going to stretch all the way from the Euphrates in the north to the river of Egypt in the south.

Most scholars would consider the River of Egypt probably to be the Wadi El-Arish, not the Nile River that we might initially think is in mind because Israel's presence certainly along the coast has never laid claim to land all the way down to the Nile or Delta area. Now, one might say the boundaries of Israel, their largest, included the territory of modern-day Jordan where the half tribe of Manasseh, where Gad and Reuben settled directly on the east bank of the Jordan Valley.

That was part of the quote, promised land. Do you remember reading the first chapter of Joshua? Joshua wanted a promise from those guys from the half-tribe of Manasseh, Reuben, and Gad. They're getting their land even before Israel crosses the Jordan.

That was their inheritance. But he wanted a promise from them that just because they got their inheritance first, they would still be with their brothers when they crossed over into Jericho from going over the Jordan and celebrating that Passover when the manna ceased, that 40-year miracle. So, he had that commitment.

Now, if somebody in the modern world says, okay, these are the boundaries, the God-given boundaries, this is real estate theology, folks. Israel has a right to now move into that part of western Jordan today that abuts the Jordan Valley and take over that land. That's part of the real estate promise in the Bible for Israel.

Well, if you read that very deterministically without it being understood with justice and mercy and compassion associated with those who presently live there, that would be a very, very horrendous thing. The same thing, some in Israel today believe there may be another temple on the Temple Mount. You can pop into a location in the Old City called the Temple Institute, where they are involved in research and developing various kinds of implements.

Some of them hope that they will be present for some kind of future temple. But again, if you read that deterministically, say you read Ezekiel 40-48, literally, this is the new temple. At what cost? Are you going to take down a mosque that was completed in 691, the Dome of the Rock? In 715, the Al-Aqsa Mosque was crowned the Temple Mount.

That's filled with all kinds of political difficulties. My point here is, one of the things that pre-millennialists do have to be careful about is if they only view things in the Old Testament that appear to be futuristic about Israel and they read that as pre-written history, they might not be sensitive. They have a charter, and they have a plan.

This is ours; everybody else moves out because God has given us claim to the land. We hold the title deed. I think there's a principle here that trumps reading the Bible deterministically.

And that is the question of justice, morality, and compassion. You may not like certain things in American society today, and you might say to yourself, I'd prefer somebody else not be in office or this policy that this government's adopted. I'm totally in disagreement with it as a Christian, but you don't solve the problem by taking out the people who put it into place. Or I would say in Israel today, suicide bombing is never an acceptable form of political protest because innocent people are destroyed.

You have a mouth and if you want to protest and if you want to change things, there are correct ways to do that. But you do not destroy innocent life to further your own particular agenda. If you think it is right.

So, to wrap this up today then, we must be careful we don't read the Bible deterministically in such a way as we impose our will on others and create hardship, undue hardship, simply because God has said it, I have a voice for this. And so, therefore, God's voice or the way I read Scripture takes priority over everything else. We do have to be sensitive and balanced in the application of what we think Scripture teaches.

Therefore, we sometimes have to take the long perspective and realize that instantaneous application of some of these things can be more disastrous if we don't

apply them sensitively. That will be it for today, and I'll pick up there on Wednesday.

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