

Dr. Robert Vannoy, Foundations of Biblical Prophecy, Lecture 15, Session 17, Hermeneutical Principles for Interpreting Prophetic Writings Resources from NotebookLM

1) Abstract, 2) Audio podcast, 3) Briefing Document, 4) Study Guide, and 5) FAQs

1. Abstract of Vannoy, Foundations of Biblical Prophecy, Lecture 15, Session 17, Hermeneutical Principles for Interpreting Prophetic Writings, Biblicalelearning.org, BeL

Robert Vannoy's lecture on interpreting prophecy emphasizes the importance of **avoiding the idea of double fulfillment or double reference, suggesting interpreters should seek a single sense in the text.** The lecture uses Malachi 4:5-6 as an example, exploring different interpretations, including double reference, generic fulfillment, and fulfillment solely in John the Baptist. **Vannoy also stresses the need for interpretive analysis to precede decisions about literal versus figurative meanings, cautioning against imposing preconceived systems onto the text.** He advocates for a balanced approach, considering grammar, history, culture, and context to understand the original writer's intent. **The lecture references various scholars and their views on literal and figurative interpretations, urging interpreters to focus on specific passages rather than relying solely on broader hermeneutical systems.** Ultimately, Vannoy promotes careful, context-driven analysis to arrive at responsible conclusions about biblical prophecies.

**2. 21 - minute Audio Podcast Created on the basis of
Dr. Vannoy, Foundations of Biblical Prophecy, Lecture 15,
Session 17 – Double click icon to play in Windows media
player or go to the Biblicalelearning.org [BeL] Site and click the
audio podcast link there (Old Testament → Major Prophets →
Foundations).**



3. Briefing Document: Vannoy, Foundations of Biblical Prophecy, Lecture 15, Session 17, Hermeneutical Principles for Interpreting Prophetic Writings

Okay, here's a detailed briefing document summarizing the key themes and ideas from the provided excerpts of Robert Vannoy's "Foundations of Biblical Prophecy, Lecture 15," focusing on guidelines for interpreting prophecy:

Briefing Document: Robert Vannoy on Interpreting Prophecy

Main Theme: This lecture focuses on two crucial guidelines for interpreting biblical prophecy: (1) avoiding the idea of double fulfillment or double reference, and (2) ensuring interpretive analysis precedes decisions about literal vs. figurative meanings. Vannoy critiques common approaches and emphasizes the importance of textual analysis and caution against letting pre-conceived theological systems dictate interpretation.

Key Ideas and Arguments:

1. Avoid Double Fulfillment/Double Reference:

- **The Problem:** Vannoy argues against the common practice of finding both a near and a far (future) fulfillment for the same prophecy, citing Daniel 8 as an example where some interpret it as referring to both Antiochus Epiphanes and the Antichrist. He questions the hermeneutical soundness of assigning multiple meanings to the same words, suggesting it can lead to indeterminate interpretations. "If words have more than one meaning, do they have any meaning? Does this make the hermeneutics indeterminate?"
- **Malachi 4:5-6 Case Study:** Vannoy uses Malachi 4:5-6 ("See, I will send you the prophet Elijah before that great and dreadful day of the Lord comes...") as a test case. He examines New Testament references (Luke 1:13-17 re: John the Baptist, Matthew 11:2-14 and 17:10-12 re: John as Elijah) and John's own denial in John 1:19-21.

- **Three Interpretive Approaches to Malachi 4:5-6: Double Reference:** This view sees an initial fulfillment in John the Baptist and a future, literal fulfillment with the reappearance of Elijah before the Day of the Lord. Vannoy quotes Henry Alford, who believes in 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."
- **Generic/Successive Fulfillment (Walter Kaiser):** Kaiser proposes a "generic prediction," where a prophecy speaks to a complex event with multiple parts, applying "indifferently to the nearest part, or to the remoter parts, or to the whole." He argues that Malachi's prophecy opens the door for a succession of "announcers" in the spirit of Elijah, from Elijah himself to John the Baptist, and even figures like Augustine, Calvin, Luther, Moody, and Graham. Vannoy critiques this as potentially undermining the idea of a single authorial intent, making the concept "very abstract".
- **Fulfillment in John the Baptist:** This position argues that the New Testament strongly suggests the prophecy was fulfilled in John the Baptist, negating the need for a further fulfillment. Jesus' statements such as "If you are willing to accept it, he is the Elijah who was to come" in Matthew 11:14 supports this. Vannoy suggests John's denial in John 1:21 could be a rejection of the rabbinical expectation of a *literal* return of Elijah, not a denial of fulfilling the *prophecy* of Elijah.
- **Vannoy's Conclusion on Double Reference:** While not ruling out double reference as impossible, Vannoy cautions against actively *seeking* it as a hermeneutical principle. He favors finding the single, intended sense of the prophecy. With Malachi 4:5-6, he leans toward fulfillment in John the Baptist due to the strength of the New Testament statements.

2. Interpretive Analysis Before Literal/Figurative Decisions:

- **The Priority of Analysis:** Vannoy emphasizes that deciding whether to interpret a passage literally or figuratively must be based on thorough interpretive analysis, considering grammar, history, culture, context, and the original writer's convictions. "Remember that interpretive analysis must precede a decision on the exact relationship between the literal and the figurative in any passage."
- **Reasons for Figurative Interpretation:** He stresses that one must provide compelling reasons arising from objective study to justify a figurative interpretation, rather than imposing it based on a pre-existing eschatological

system. "If a given interpreter declares that a certain expression is figurative, he must give reasons for assigning a figurative meaning."

- **Avoiding Simplistic Labels:** Vannoy discourages using broad labels like "literal interpreter" or "figurative interpreter," arguing that a balanced interpreter should be open to both based on what the passage demands.
- **Figurative Interpretation's Validity:** He makes it clear that interpreting figuratively isn't inherently wrong if it aligns with the passage's intended meaning.
- **The System vs. Exegesis Dilemma:** Vannoy raises the question of whether to interpret a passage based on a pre-existing theological system or to build the system based on the exegesis of individual passages. While acknowledging that both directions can be involved, he cautions against allowing the system to overly determine the meaning of the text. Meaning should come *out* of the text, not be brought *to* it.
- **Boettner's "Literal Unless Absurd" Approach:** Vannoy cites Loraine Boettner's principle of "literal wherever possible" or "literal unless absurd." He notes the lack of explicit guidance within Scripture itself on when to take something literally or figuratively, highlighting the reliance on individual judgment, experience, and common sense.
- **Malachi 4:5-6 Reconsidered:** He revisits Malachi 4:5-6 as an example where literal and figurative language may intersect, with John the Baptist fulfilling the prophecy in a non-literal return of Elijah.
- **Illustrations: Isaiah 2:4 and 4:2:** Vannoy uses Isaiah 2:4 ("They will beat their swords into plowshares") and Isaiah 4:2 ("In that day the branch of the Lord will be beautiful and glorious") to illustrate the spectrum of interpretations, from strictly literal to fully figurative/symbolic, and how different eschatological systems (amillennialism vs. premillennialism) influence these interpretations.
- **Turner and Gundry's Perspective:** Vannoy cites Turner, who argues against simplistic views that eschatological differences arise *solely* from interpretive methods. He acknowledges that while literal interpretation influences theology, the reverse is also true. He quotes Gundry, who warns against the influence of contemporary moods and conditions on eschatology. Turner emphasizes the need to get to "hand-to-hand exegetical combat on particular passages and phrasing" (quoting Greg Bahnsen).

Overall Emphasis:

Vannoy advocates for a careful, textually grounded approach to interpreting prophecy, emphasizing the importance of avoiding pre-conceived notions and allowing the text itself to guide the interpretation. He cautions against the over-application of "double fulfillment" and stresses that figurative interpretations should be justified by the text, not solely by theological systems. He advocates that hermeneutical debates need to come down to the level of specific passages.

4. Study Guide: Vannoy, Foundations of Biblical Prophecy, Lecture 15, Session 17, Hermeneutical Principles for Interpreting Prophetic Writings

Interpreting Biblical Prophecy: A Study Guide

I. Key Concepts and Principles

- **Single Sense of Scripture:** The principle that each passage of Scripture has one primary meaning intended by the author. This opposes the idea of multiple layers of meaning (allegorical method).
- **Double Fulfillment/Reference:** The idea that a single prophecy can have two or more distinct fulfillments, often separated by significant periods of time.
- **Generic (or Successive) Fulfillment:** A concept where a prophecy speaks of a complex event with multiple parts, and specific elements of the prophecy can apply to different parts of the overall event throughout history.
- **Literal vs. Figurative Interpretation:** Determining whether a passage is intended to be understood in its plain, ordinary sense (literal) or as a symbolic representation of something else (figurative).
- **Authorial Intent:** Determining the meaning of a passage by seeking to understand what the original author intended to communicate to their audience.
- **Eschatology:** The study of the end times or last things, including beliefs about the future fulfillment of prophecies.
- **Hermeneutics:** The principles and methods of interpreting texts, especially religious texts like the Bible.
- **Exegesis:** The critical interpretation and explanation of a text, especially of scripture.
- **Progressive Revelation:** The concept that God gradually reveals more of His plan and character throughout the Bible, with later revelations building upon earlier ones.
- **Preconceived Systems:** Approaching biblical interpretation with pre-existing theological frameworks or eschatological systems, which can influence the interpretation of specific passages.

II. Key Passages

- **Malachi 4:5-6:** The prophecy of Elijah's return before the "great and dreadful day of the Lord."
- **Luke 1:13-17:** The angel's announcement of John the Baptist's birth and his role as a forerunner "in the spirit and power of Elijah."
- **Matthew 11:2-14:** Jesus' statements about John the Baptist being the "Elijah who was to come."
- **Matthew 17:10-13:** The disciples' question about Elijah's coming and Jesus' response that Elijah has already come (referring to John the Baptist).
- **John 1:19-21:** John the Baptist's denial that he is Elijah.
- **Jeremiah 30:9:** Prophecy of David as king in the future.
- **Ezekiel 34:23:** Prophecy of David as shepherd in the future.
- **Isaiah 2:4:** The prophecy of swords being beaten into plowshares and a time of universal peace.
- **Isaiah 4:2:** The prophecy of the "branch of the Lord" being beautiful and glorious.
- **Revelation 11:3:** The prophecy of two witnesses who will prophesy in sackcloth.
- **Isaiah 7:14:** Prophecy of a virgin bearing a son.
- **Deuteronomy 18:** Reference to the prophetic institution.

III. Individuals and Views

- **Robert Vannoy:** Emphasizes the importance of seeking the single sense of Scripture and cautions against automatically looking for double fulfillments.
- **Henry Alford:** Advocate of double reference in relation to Malachi 4:5-6, seeing a partial fulfillment in John the Baptist and a future fulfillment with a literal Elijah.
- **Walter Kaiser:** Proponent of the "generic" view of prophecy, arguing that prophecies can have a single truth intention with multiple particulars fulfilled throughout history.
- **Loraine Boettner:** Suggests the principle of "literal wherever possible" but acknowledges that some passages must be understood figuratively, relying on "sanctified common sense."

- **Willis J. Beecher:** Defined a "generic prediction."
- **Turner and Gundry:** Emphasize the influence of theological presuppositions on hermeneutics and the need to focus on the interpretation of specific biblical passages rather than relying on broad generalizations about hermeneutical systems.
- **Greg Bahnsen:** Stresses the importance of "hand-to-hand exegetical combat" on particular passages to resolve debates about eschatological interpretations.

IV. Quiz

Answer the following questions in 2-3 sentences each.

1. What is the "double reference" approach to interpreting prophecy, and what is Vannoy's primary concern with this method?
2. Explain Walter Kaiser's concept of "generic prophecy," and give an example of how he applies it to Malachi 4:5-6.
3. According to the lecture, how do advocates of the view that Malachi 4:5-6 is fulfilled in John the Baptist address John's denial that he is Elijah in John 1:21?
4. According to the lecture, what New Testament passages suggest Malachi 4:5-6 is fulfilled in John the Baptist?
5. According to Vannoy, what should guide our decisions about whether to interpret a passage literally or figuratively?
6. Explain Boettner's principle of "literal wherever possible" and the challenges associated with determining when a passage should be interpreted figuratively.
7. How do amillennialists and premillennialists typically differ in their interpretation of Isaiah 2:4, regarding the beating of swords into plowshares?
8. According to the lecture, what is "progressive revelation?"
9. Explain the significance of authorial intent for correctly interpreting scripture.
10. What is eschatology?

V. Quiz Answer Key

1. The "double reference" approach suggests that a prophecy can have two or more fulfillments, often separated in time. Vannoy's concern is that automatically

looking for double fulfillments can lead to indeterminate hermeneutics and obscure the single, intended meaning of the text.

2. Kaiser's "generic prophecy" views a prophecy as a complex event with multiple parts, where specific elements can apply to different points in history. He applies it to Malachi 4:5-6 by seeing Elijah as the start of a line of forerunners, with John the Baptist and others also fulfilling the prophecy in part.
3. Advocates of this view argue that John's denial is specifically a rejection of the Rabbis' literal expectation of Elijah's return, rather than a denial of his role as the fulfillment of Malachi's prophecy in a broader sense.
4. According to the lecture, the New Testament passages that suggest Malachi 4:5-6 is fulfilled in John the Baptist are Luke 1:13-17, Matthew 11:2-14, and Matthew 17:10-13. These passages connect John's ministry with the role of Elijah who was to come.
5. According to Vannoy, our decisions about literal vs. figurative interpretation should be guided by the context of the passage, grammar, history, culture, and the author's intent, rather than preconceived eschatological systems.
6. Boettner's principle suggests interpreting passages literally unless the literal interpretation leads to absurdity or contradiction. However, determining when a passage is "absurd" can be subjective and challenging, as there are no set rules for identifying figurative language.
7. Amillennialists often interpret Isaiah 2:4 figuratively, seeing it as a present spiritual reality within the church. Premillennialists typically interpret it literally, anticipating a future time of earthly peace during the Messianic kingdom.
8. Progressive revelation is the concept that God gradually reveals more of His plan and character throughout the Bible, with later revelations building upon earlier ones.
9. Authorial intent is significant for correctly interpreting Scripture because it emphasizes understanding the meaning that the original author intended to communicate to their audience.
10. Eschatology is the study of the end times or last things, including beliefs about the future fulfillment of prophecies.

VI. Essay Questions

1. Discuss the advantages and disadvantages of interpreting biblical prophecy using the "double reference" approach. Provide specific examples from the lecture to support your arguments.
2. Compare and contrast Walter Kaiser's "generic prophecy" concept with the more traditional "double fulfillment" approach. In what ways does Kaiser attempt to avoid the perceived pitfalls of double fulfillment?
3. Explore the complexities of determining whether a passage should be interpreted literally or figuratively. How can theological presuppositions influence this process, and what safeguards can interpreters employ to minimize bias?
4. Analyze the various interpretations of Malachi 4:5-6 presented in the lecture. Which interpretation do you find most compelling, and why?
5. Explain and discuss the hermeneutical approach of Robert Vannoy and provide specific examples that support or refute his claims.

VII. Glossary of Key Terms

- **Allegorical Method:** An interpretative approach that seeks to find hidden or symbolic meanings in a text, often beyond its literal sense.
- **Amillennialism:** The belief that the millennium (the 1000-year reign of Christ) is a symbolic representation of the present church age, rather than a future earthly kingdom.
- **Antichrist:** A person or power opposed to Christ and His followers, often associated with the end times.
- **Apologetic:** Defending the Christian faith through reasoned arguments and evidence.
- **Covenant Theology:** A theological framework that emphasizes the covenants between God and humanity, particularly the covenants of works and grace.
- **Dispensationalism:** A theological system that divides history into distinct "dispensations" or periods, each with its own set of rules and responsibilities for humanity.
- **Eschatological:** Relating to eschatology, the study of the end times or last things.
- **Hermeneutical Principle:** A guideline or rule used in the interpretation of texts.
- **Hyperliteralism:** An overly strict adherence to the literal meaning of a text, often ignoring figurative language or symbolic interpretations.
- **Messianic:** Relating to the Messiah, the promised deliverer of Israel, often understood by Christians to be Jesus Christ.
- **Premillennialism:** The belief that Christ will return to earth before the millennium, establishing a literal earthly kingdom for 1000 years.
- **Prophetic Institution:** A group of individuals who have the gift of prophecy.
- **Spiritualizing:** Interpreting a text in a non-literal way.

5. FAQs on Vannoy, Foundations of Biblical Prophecy, Lecture 15, Session 17, Hermeneutical Principles for Interpreting Prophetic Writings, Biblicalelearning.org (BeL)

Prophecy Interpretation FAQ:

1. What is meant by "double fulfillment" or "double reference" in the context of interpreting prophecy, and why does Vannoy advise against seeking it as a primary hermeneutical rule?

Double fulfillment refers to the idea that a single prophetic statement can have two or more fulfillments, typically a near or partial fulfillment and a later, more complete fulfillment. Vannoy cautions against actively *seeking* this as a rule because he argues it can lead to indeterminate meanings and multiple layers of interpretation that obscure the original intent of the text. He suggests prioritizing the single sense of the author.

2. How does the prophecy in Malachi 4:5-6 ("I will send you the prophet Elijah before the great and dreadful day of the Lord") exemplify the challenge of interpreting prophetic fulfillment?

Malachi 4:5-6 is challenging because the New Testament contains references suggesting fulfillment in John the Baptist (Luke 1:17, Matt 11:14, Matt 17:12), while some interpret it as requiring a future, literal return of Elijah before the Day of the Lord. This raises the question of whether the prophecy has a single fulfillment, a double fulfillment, or a more nuanced understanding of fulfillment.

3. What are the three main interpretive approaches to Malachi 4:5-6 presented by Vannoy, and what are their key differences?

- **Double Reference:** This view argues for an initial fulfillment in John the Baptist and a future, complete fulfillment in a literal return of Elijah before the Day of the Lord.
- **Generic or Successive Fulfillment (Walter Kaiser):** This approach posits that the prophecy is a "generic prediction" encompassing a series of fulfillments related to the "spirit and power of Elijah" throughout history, beginning with Elijah, including John the Baptist, and continuing with various reformers and foretellers.

- **Fulfillment in John the Baptist:** This interpretation claims the prophecy is fulfilled solely in John the Baptist, based on the New Testament's explicit references to John as "Elijah who was to come," arguing against the need for a future literal fulfillment.

4. According to Vannoy, what are the strengths and weaknesses of Walter Kaiser's "generic fulfillment" approach to prophecy?

Vannoy suggests that Kaiser's approach attempts to avoid the concept of double fulfillment while acknowledging the multiple references to Elijah in the scriptures. The weakness of Kaiser's approach is that it is a somewhat abstract and potentially complex way of understanding what he thinks is a "single truth intention."

5. What does it mean to say that "interpretive analysis must precede a decision on the exact relationship between the literal and the figurative in any passage," and why is this principle important?

This means interpreters should carefully examine the grammar, historical context, cultural setting, and writer's intent *before* deciding whether a passage should be understood literally or figuratively. It emphasizes allowing the text itself to guide the interpretation rather than imposing a pre-determined interpretive framework. This is important to avoid misinterpreting scripture based on personal biases or eschatological systems.

6. Why does Vannoy discourage simplistic labels such as "literal interpreter" or "figurative interpreter"?

Such labels are unhelpful because they suggest a rigid adherence to one interpretive method, potentially hindering the interpreter's ability to grapple with the nuances of meaning and ideas in the text. The interpreter must approach the text with an open mind and be sensitive to the context, purpose and style of the author.

7. What are some of the factors Loraine Boettner suggests considering when determining whether a passage in Scripture should be taken literally or figuratively?

Boettner suggests considering the nature of the material (historical, didactic, prophetic), the historical setting, the style and purpose of the writer, and using "sanctified common sense." He acknowledges that conclusions will vary somewhat among individuals.

8. What is Bahnsen's advice regarding eschatological debates, and how does Turner relate this advice to the interpretation of specific biblical passages?

Bahnsen advises that eschatological debates should focus on "hand-to-hand exegetical combat on particular passages and phrasing," rather than generalities about interpretive systems. Turner agrees and argues that the interpretation of specific passages should involve careful consideration of the text itself, rather than imposing a pre-determined system or hermeneutic.