

## **\*PRINCIPLES FOR INTERPRETING PROPHETIC PASSAGES\***

There are some particular principles of interpretation in regard to eschatology (i.e. prophecy, last things) In addition to the basic principles of Bible interpretation, the following ones should also be kept in mind when studying Bible prophecy (Note: All of these points, & most of the sub-points are taken from "Syllabus for OT Prophecy" (unpublished paper) or "Tools for Preaching & Teaching the Bible," both by Dr. Stewart Custer.-mwe

### **"INTERPRET CHRISTOLOGICALLY."**

a) "**Our Lord Jesus Christ is the heart and center of all prophecy** (cf. **I Pet. 1:10-11**). Prophecy is arranged in concentric circles around Him. See A.T. Pierson: 'Knowing the Scriptures,' pp. 34-35." (Custer, Syllabus, p. 4) & "Michael P.V. Barrett, "Beginning With Moses: A Guide to Finding Christ in the Old Testament" (Ambassador-Emerald International: Belfast, Northern Ireland, 1999).

b) **Throughout the Old & New Testament Jesus Christ is revealed**. He is seen clearly in the New Testament miracles He performed and statements that He made about Himself. But besides such direct statements we are told that many of the characters, instances, etc., of the Bible are types or shadows of Jesus Christ. For example Romans 5:14 tells us that Adam was 'the figure of him that was to come.' In Luke 24:25-27 we are told that ALL the Scriptures speak of Christ. When interpreting Scripture, and especially prophecy, we need to remember that Christ truly is 'the heart and center of all prophecy.'" (Custer) cf. Heb. 9:9-11,24-26; 11:19 I Pet. 3:20-22; etc.

c) **For a good study on this subject see "Christology of the Old Testament," by E.W. Hengstenberg**. This is a classic and is now in an abridged form running to 700 pages. Such books as "Portraits of Christ in Genesis," "The Tabernacle," & "The Romance of Redemption,"-all by M.R. DeHaan (Zondervan: Grand Rapids, MI), "The Tabernacle," by Henry Soltau (Kregel Publications: Grand Rapids, MI, n.d.) are a few examples of books that are helpful in regard to types. The one by Hengstenberg deals with prophetic passages.

**"INTERPRET ACCORDING TO THE PERSPECTIVE OF PROPHECY."** We have reference here to the prophet and how he views things.

a) "**The prophet often sees things together that are widely separated in fulfillment**: The first and second advents of Christ" (**Isa. 61:1-2**). (Custer, Syllabus, p. 4). In reading this passage, if you were a Jew living before Christ you would get the impression that when the Messiah came He would immediately set up His kingdom and begin to rule. But such was not the case. It's interesting to note that when Christ read this passage in the synagogue he deliberately stopped in the middle of verse two (Lk. 4:16-21)! This also explains why many of His followers wanted to set Him up as a physical, political king. They misunderstood this prophecy, because they failed to realize that prophetic passages often telescope, or condense, events that are widely separated.

b) "**The future often appears to be present or completely past**... Prophecies of the future are sometimes described with ancient weapons (**Zech. 9:10**)." (Ibid).

**"DON'T OVER-EMPHASIZE PROPHECY."** A good student of Scripture studies all of Scripture, not just one part. During the past 2-3 decades there has been a real "glut" of books dealing with Bible prophecy which have flooded the market. Some people spend all their time studying nothing but prophecy. Some preachers spend all their time preaching on just one subject: prophecy. To do so is not good. If there is no balance in our preaching & teaching, it will result in the immature development of believers.

**"DON'T UNDER-EMPHASIZE PROPHECY."** Sometimes one may be tempted to say something similar to the following: "Bible prophecy is too complicated. I think I'll just forget about studying it & preaching on it." However that is a wrong attitude! We should not shy away from preaching on a subject of theology because it involves hard, intensive study! God says some very definite things about the sluggard in the book of Proverbs and a pastor can be lazy in his study and sermon preparation, just as a laborer can be lazy in any other job. May we not be found guilty of laziness when we stand at the judgment seat of Christ!

**“DON'T BE TOO RELEVANT IN YOUR INTERPRETATION OF PROPHECY.”** We can come up with interpretations that are so "up to date" or relevant, that if Christ doesn't return soon, we will look silly-not to mention wrong! The ones who gathered on a hill in white robes a century or more ago to await Christ's coming are a case in point. Several recent groups and cults have done similar things in the past 20 years! Such groups maintain that they have received their views from a study of the Bible. But to develop such faulty teachings will bring great shame upon Christ and His Word! Jesus said no one knows the day or the hour of His return (Mt. 24:36)! **So steer clear of unbiblical predictions & interpretations, especially in regard to prophecy!** False cults have been making erroneous predictions for a century or more, but it's particularly distressing when Bible believers make similar mistakes!

#### **A few examples:**

- **1982-The "Jupiter" Effect.** A number of fundamental preachers said that 1982 was going to be the year that the tribulation was going to start. The reason they gave was that all 9 planets would be lined up on one side of the sun, and they felt that this would trigger gravitational upheavals that would occur on earth and be the start of the signs described in the book of Revelation. There were at least two problems with that idea (both of which were pointed out by Christians at that time): (1) The planets would not be in a straight line, but spread out over a 100 degree angle, (2) Such an astronomical occurrence happens every 179 years, and there is nothing in past history that indicates anything extraordinary like that has ever happened in the past! (Custer, quoting Dr. Joseph Henson). Of course nothing happened in 1982, and Christians who had promoted such thinking, or passed out tracts to that effect, were greatly humiliated & embarrassed!
- **Hal Lindsey.** Lindsey wrote the famous book on Bible prophecy, "The Late, Great Planet Earth," one of the highest selling books of all time! He is a professing Christian (who has been married three times!). He has written some good things regarding Bible prophecy. Unfortunately his later books seem to have gotten farther and farther off base! One man has said about Lindsey's book on Revelation: "Some commentaries on Revelation are helpful to read after generations; Lindsey's [was] so 'relevant' for...this decade that if the Lord does not return now [the 1980's] it will be of little value for the next generation." (A statement that turned out to be rather prophetic-no pun intended) (Faith for the Family, Vol. 5, No. 10, p. 12).

Here are a few examples of what this reviewer was referring to: "He (Lindsey) interprets the sixth seal as a nuclear exchange (pp. 108ff.), the first trumpet as a more severe nuclear attack (p. 130), the second trumpet as a colossal H-bomb (p. 131), the third trumpet as another thermonuclear weapon (p. 132), and the fourth trumpet as the pollution in the atmosphere caused by the fallout from the nuclear exchanges (p. 133). Lindsey cannot decide whether the fifth trumpet refers to supernatural mutant locusts or to Cobra helicopters (pp. 138ff.). He is definite in claiming that the last earthquake is a reference to the last full-scale nuclear exchange of all remaining missiles (p. 226)." (Ibid). Lindsey also (previously) stated that he believed Christ would return in 1988. That kind of relevancy is to be avoided at all costs!"

- **The Harbinger? – by Jonathan Cahn**
- **Four Blood Moons? – by John Hagee & Mark Biltz**

#### **CONCLUSION:**

It is hoped that this study has aided you in learning the tools of proper biblical interpretation. It now remains for you to use them daily, as you seek to mine the wealth of spiritual treasure to be found in the Bible! May we say with Psalmist: "*O how I love thy law! It is my meditation all the day*" (Ps. 119:97).

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#### **SUGGESTED READING**

Custer, Stewart. "Tools for Preaching and Teaching the Bible" (chapters 2-5, pp. 11-52, BJU Press: Greenville, SC, 1979). NOTE: A revised & enlarged edition of this book was issued in 1997 & similar material is found in that volume on pp. 39-52.

MacArthur, John F. Jr. "Charismatic Chaos" (chapter 4, pp. 85-105 has a good section on the subject of biblical hermeneutics). Zondervan Publishing House: Grand Rapids, MI, 1992.