

Interpreting Prophecy and Apocalyptic

By [Jonathan Menn](#), J.D., M.Div.

[Director of Equipping Church Leaders-East Africa](#)

A brief summary of Chapter 2 in the book entitled, [Biblical Eschatology](#) (2nd ed., Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2018) by [Jonathan Menn](#)

Prophecy can be one of the most challenging areas of biblical interpretation. Three main reasons for that are: (1) failure to apply the basic principles of biblical interpretation; (2) misunderstanding the genre of prophecy; and (3) failing to understand basic biblical theology.¹

The Nature of Biblical Prophets and Prophecy

The prophet was to be a man of God, a witness for God, a servant of God, and committed to God. He was to speak the voice of God, in contrast to listening to the voice of the people. Likewise, he served as a critic of the culture from a godly perspective.

The main activity of OT prophets was *not* predicting the future. Rather, OT biblical prophecy was as interested in the present as in the future. The prophets all had essentially a two-fold message and ministry: (1) They warned God's people of the consequences of disobedience to the Lord's ways by *oracles of judgment*; and (2) They called God's people back to faithfulness by *oracles of salvation*.² In other words, all OT prophets were concerned with changing

¹ There are many good books on biblical interpretation and biblical theology. These include: *Biblical Interpretation*: Kay Arthur, *How to Study Your Bible* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House, 1994); Gordon Fee and Douglas Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth* (Grand Rapids: Academie, 1982); Grant Osborne, *The Hermeneutical Spiral* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1991); William Webb, *Slaves, Women & Homosexuals: Exploring the Hermeneutics of Cultural Analysis* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2001); Bennie Wolvaardt, *How to Interpret the Bible: A Do-It-Yourself Manual*. (London: Veritas College, 2005); Jonathan Menn, *Biblical Interpretation* (2011), online: <https://sites.google.com/site/equippingpastorsdocuments/>. *Biblical Theology*: T. Desmond Alexander, *From Eden to the New Jerusalem: Exploring God's Plan for Life on Earth* (Nottingham, England: Inter-Varsity, 2008); G. K. Beale, *A New Testament Biblical Theology: The Unfolding of the Old Testament in the New* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011); Graeme Goldsworthy, *According to Plan: The Unfolding Revelation of God in the Bible* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1991); Jonathan Menn, *Biblical Theology* (2012), online: <https://sites.google.com/site/equippingpastorsdocuments/>.

² VanGemeren, *Interpreting*, 78–79.

people's behavior. As such, much of OT prophecy was "conditional" on people's repentance and behavior, even when a prophecy appeared to be unconditional (e.g., Jonah 3).

Historically one can see a shift in prophetic emphasis after Israel's exile in Babylon. Before the exile the prophets tended to stress Israel's rebelliousness. After the exile, the emphasis shifted toward the responsibility of God's people to prepare for the full establishing of God's kingdom.³

General Considerations for Interpreting Prophecy

Emphasis on God, not on specific events.

Prophetic messages are more the "forth-telling" of God's word, than the foretelling of specific, inevitable, future events. The fulfillment of prophecy lies in a person (God), and he may fulfill his word *however* and *whenever* he chooses.

Emphasis on patterns and themes.

Because of their two-fold message (judgment and salvation), even though the prophets spoke about specific crises, their underlying messages of judgment and salvation are relevant for many generations. Further, "Old Testament end-time predictions commonly are connected by *themes* and key words rather than by a strict chronological order (for example, see Dan 7:8-27; 8:9-26; Rev 16-19)."⁴ Similar themes run throughout the prophets. Those themes include: God's covenant with his people; the presence of God; God as king; God's Messiah; the Day of the Lord; the kingdom of God; and the Spirit of the Lord. The NT writers saw the OT prophetic writings primarily as *patterns* that were fulfilled in the NT.

Contingency in prophecy.

"The biblical view of prophecy is that a forecast is not necessarily a prediction to be fulfilled at all hazards. Rather a prediction of disaster is a hint in order that proper steps might be taken to avert the evil. Similarly, a *prediction* of blessing is an encouragement, that there might be perseverance in the right course."⁵ We see this, for example, in God's "changing his mind" in response to Moses' intercession on behalf of Israel after God had threatened to destroy Israel (Exod 32:9-14), and in his not destroying Nineveh after it repented (Jonah 3:1-10).

Prophets build on earlier prophecies.

God's covenants grow and develop through the prophets who develop and

³ Ibid., 57–58, 68, 213–14.

⁴ Oropeza, *99 Reasons*, 195n.10.

⁵ Ford, *Abomination of Desolation*, 75, 99n.72.

transform them through their proclamations of *judgment* and salvation. An example is the promise of land in the Abrahamic Covenant: The land initially was undefined (Gen 12:1). It was first defined as what Abram could see (Gen 13:14-15), then was geographically described (Gen 15:18-21; 17:8), and finally was included in the comprehensive statement that “your seed shall possess the gates of their [lit., ‘his’] enemies” (Gen 22:17). The OT indicates that the promise of land was physically fulfilled at least twice: in the days of Joshua (Josh 21:43-45); and during the reign of Solomon (1 Kgs 4:20-21). However, because of disobedience Israel was dispossessed from the land, so the promise was never ultimately fulfilled during the OT. The land was still longed for and restoration was promised during the exile (see Ezek 20:1-44). The promise was again partially fulfilled physically after the exile.

Prophetic idiom.

The OT prophets spoke within the framework, and used terms, they were familiar with and that made sense to their hearers. They used the imagery of the temple and Zion, and they spoke of the kingdom in terms of a literal king from the line of David sitting on a throne in a palace in Jerusalem. This is known as “prophetic idiom.”⁶ Even in the NT, when God revealed the *fulfillment* of OT prophecy and when the NT writers point forward to the consummation of God’s plan, they use the language that their contemporaries would understand. Examples of this include: Jesus describes his body as the “temple” (John 2:18-22); the church as a whole is called the “temple” or the “tabernacle” in 1 Cor 3:9, 16-17; 2 Cor 6:16-17:1; Eph 2:21; 1 Pet 2:5; Rev 3:12; Rev 13:6; Paul uses OT language of burnt offerings to describe money given to assist his ministry (Phil 4:18; see Exod 29:18); in Revelation the leaders of end-time nations are referred to as “kings” (e.g., Rev 16:14; 19:18).

Non-literal fulfillment.

Because God’s purposes develop in interaction with human choices and events, prophecies are not always fulfilled “literally.” Stephen Travis gives examples of this: “Jeremiah and Isaiah predicted that Babylon would fall to the Medes (Jeremiah [51]:11, 28; Isaiah 13:17), and Isaiah described graphically the total destruction of Babylon and the merciless killing of its people (Isaiah 13:14-22). But in fact Babylon fell to the Persians who had gained control of the Medes before capturing Babylon. And Babylon surrendered without a struggle. The city was not destroyed, and continued to be inhabited. So, the prophecy of Babylon’s fall was fulfilled substantially, but not literally.”⁷

Changed circumstances and the manner of fulfillment.

⁶ Irons, “Prophetic Idiom.” Chisholm refers to this as “contextualization.” Chisholm, “When Prophecy Appears to Fail,” 572–74.

⁷ Travis, *I Believe*, 137–38.

Prophecies were based on specific historical situations; therefore, changed circumstances affect the way in which the prophecies are fulfilled. There have been momentous geopolitical changes that have altered the social landscape since the OT prophecies were given. More importantly, the coming of Jesus Christ altered the “*theological* landscape” in profound ways. This means that, although similar themes and principles run throughout the prophets, and God’s character remains the same, we cannot expect apparently unfulfilled OT prophecies to be fulfilled exactly as the people (or even the prophets themselves) may have envisioned.

The Profound Effect of the NT on OT Prophecy

The full meaning of any particular passage or prophecy may not be clear unless the whole Bible and the stage of redemptive history are taken into consideration. Dennis Johnson makes this point clearly: “To read the Bible contextually as *the Word of God* must include the completed canon as the ultimate context of any particular passage.”⁸

Progressive revelation.

Graeme Goldsworthy states an important hermeneutical point, “It is impossible from the Old Testament alone to understand the full measure of God’s acts and promises that it records.”⁹ The reason why the OT alone does not convey its full, underlying meaning is the doctrine of progressive revelation, i.e., the truths of the Bible were not revealed all *at once* but were progressively revealed over time. Jesus and the NT authors understood this. They saw the entire OT as in some way a book about Jesus. He is its central person and integrating theme¹⁰ and is “the final and the fullest revelation of what the promises are really about.”¹¹

Because the Bible ultimately is the story about Jesus Christ, who is explicitly revealed only in the NT, the NT writers generally look at the OT in a “typological” way.¹² The NT reveals that OT Israel as a nation, and all of its laws, ceremonies, and institutions, and the OT prophecies concerning it, were “types,” “symbols,” “shadows,” “copies,” or “examples” of NT realities that were fulfilled and superseded in Christ and his church.¹³

The form of prophetic fulfillment.

⁸ Johnson, *Him We Proclaim*, 156. As P. W. L. Walker states, it is “illegitimate to approach the Old Testament text as though the New Testament had not been written.” Walker, *Jesus*, 313.

⁹ Goldsworthy, *According to Plan*, 54; see also Schnabel, *40 Questions*, 11.

¹⁰ Luke 24:25-27, 44-45; John 5:39-40, 46; Acts 3:18, 24; Acts 10:43; Acts 26:22-23; 2 Cor 1:20; 1 Pet 1:10-12; Heb 1:1-3. See Gaebelein 1958: 392-95.

¹¹ Goldsworthy, *According to Plan*, 65.

¹² Ramm, *Interpretation*, 260–69; Goldsworthy, *According to Plan*, 67–69.

¹³ See Matt 5:17; 1 Cor 10:1-6; 2 Cor 3:12-16; Gal 3:23-4:7, 21-31; Col 2:16-17; Heb 1:1-2; 8:1-10:22.

Because of the transformative nature of the coming of Christ and the inauguration of the New Covenant, the *form* in which OT prophecies are fulfilled in the New Covenant era are likely to be different from the Old Covenant *form* in which the prophecies themselves were originally *given*. David Holwerda explains, “When fulfillment happens, the institutions that were types or symbols of that reality are no longer necessary. They are displaced by the reality they symbolize.”¹⁴ E. F. Kevan notes, “Examples of the transmutation of the prophecies may be seen in the Davidic Kingship, the Servant, the Chosen People, the Hill of Zion, the institution of worship through Priest and Sacrifice, and the Messianic hope. . . . Our Lord himself transmuted many of the Old Covenant conceptions, such as the Sabbath, Ceremonial Defilement, the Temple, and the Davidic Kingship. It was because of His transmutation of the last that the Jews drove Him to His death.”¹⁵

NT reinterpretation of OT prophecy.

The NT demonstrates that the ultimate meaning and fulfillment of OT prophecies go far beyond the “physical” aspects of ancient Israel. In fact, as George Eldon Ladd states, “the Old Testament did not clearly foresee how its own prophecies were to be fulfilled. They were fulfilled in ways quite unforeseen by the Old Testament itself and *unexpected* by the Jews. With regard to the first coming of Christ, *the Old Testament is interpreted by the New Testament.*”¹⁶ While some might say that the NT “spiritualizes” much of OT prophecy, it is probably more accurate to say that the NT *reinterprets* or *reapplies* OT prophecy.¹⁷ In the NT, prophetic fulfillment is played out in the physical realm but in a new, spiritual key.

An example of the NT’s reinterpreting OT prophecy is the “land” promise of the Abrahamic Covenant: The NT reinterprets the OT physical Canaan as a figure of the true “land”: the earth in its entirety (Rom 4:13); and the heavenly city, the New Jerusalem (Heb 11:8-16; Revelation 21-22). Further, the heart of the land promise was Israel’s “rest” from all of its enemies and full provision for all of its needs.¹⁸ That has been transformed into the believers’ salvation or spiritual rest (Heb 3:7-4:11).

Specific Considerations for Interpreting Prophetic Language

¹⁴ Holwerda, *Eschatology*, 74–75.

¹⁵ Kevan, “Covenants,” 27.

¹⁶ Ladd, “Historic Premillennialism,” 27, emphasis in original.

¹⁷ This phenomenon occurs throughout the NT, culminating in Revelation. With respect to Revelation, Richard Bauckham observes, “John is very conscious of writing in a long tradition of prophetic oracles and so is constantly echoing and reapplying the oracles of his predecessors.” Bauckham, “Economic Critique,” 53. Revelation takes every OT image and limited frame of reference in Zechariah 14 and expands or transforms it.

¹⁸ See Deut 12:9-11; 25:19; Josh 1:2-8; Ps 95:10-11.

“Literal,” “metaphorical,” “physical,” and “spiritual.”

Do not confuse “literal” with “physical.” The “literal” meaning of a text is that which is “natural,” “proper,” “obvious,” and “normal.”¹⁹ This means that the genre of the text that one is interpreting is of crucial importance. In other words, the “literal” way to interpret *poetry* is “poetically”; the “literal” way to interpret symbols is “symbolically”; the “literal” way to interpret metaphor is “metaphorically.”²⁰ *Visions and symbolic language.* Visions and symbolic language are *not like* the *didactic* prose of the Epistles or the narrative stories of the Pentateuch, the historical books of the OT, the Gospels, or Acts. The OT prophets typically prophesied in the form of *visions, parables, and “dark sayings.”*²¹ The broad context of Revelation, beginning with Rev 1:1’s use of *sēmainō* (“communicate by symbols”) and *deichnumi* (“show”), together with the repeated formula “I saw” (or similar expressions) that introduces symbolic visions throughout the book,²² denote “the general symbolic nature of the communication,” as opposed to the simple conveyance of facts and historical information.²³

The visionary and symbolic language used in much of prophecy requires that we distinguish four levels of communication: (1) *the linguistic level* (i.e., the textual record itself); (2) *the visionary level* (i.e., what the prophet actually saw; his “visual experience”); (3) *the referential level* (i.e., the historical reference of the various particulars in the description); and (4) *the symbolic level* (i.e., the interpretation of what the symbolic imagery actually connotes about its historical referent).²⁴

This is hermeneutically and exegetically significant. The idea that one should interpret “literally” except where one is forced to interpret symbolically by clear contextual indications “should be turned on its head” in connection with the interpretation of Revelation and other prophecy (especially the apocalyptic form of prophecy) since, although some parts are not symbolic, “the essence of the book is figurative.”²⁵ An example of this is seen in Rev 20:1-6. Greg Beale points out that, in that passage, John employs the words “one thousand years,” “resurrection,” and “life” because he saw, at the *visionary level*, people who were resurrected and given life for one thousand years. Because the objects he sees and what he hears are seen and heard in a vision, they are not *first* to be understood literally but viewed as symbolically portrayed and communicated, which is the *symbolic level* of the vision. That this vision is shot through with symbols is apparent merely from the obvious symbolic nature of such words as “chain,” “abyss,” “dragon,” “serpent,” “locked,” “sealed,” and “beast.” Therefore, the words “resurrection” and “life,” for example, do not by themselves give a clue

¹⁹ Ramm, *Protestant*, 119–23.

²⁰ See Garlington, “Reigning,” n.p.n.27; Poythress, “Genre and Hermeneutics,” 48–52.

²¹ Ps 78:2; Ezek 17:2; 20:49; 24:3; Hos 12:10; Matt 13:35.

²² Rev 4:1; 12:1-3; 13:1-3; 14:1; 17:1-3.

²³ Beale, *Revelation*, 973.

²⁴ Poythress, “Genre and Hermeneutics,” 41–42.

²⁵ Beale, *Revelation*, 52.

about whether the visionary, symbolic portrayal has a one-to-one (literal) correspondence to its historical referent together with a figurative meaning or only an indirect figurative relation. Thorough exegesis must decide in each case.²⁶

Final Guidelines for Interpreting Prophecy

The following are suggestions for interpreting prophetic symbolism:²⁷

Approach symbolism with humility.

We must approach prophecy in a spirit of humility. This is particularly important since much prophetic language is both ambiguous and figurative. Even Daniel found his vision beyond his own understanding (Dan 8:27). It therefore should not surprise us that biblical prophecy may be difficult to understand.

Recognize the primacy of imagination over reason.

Prophecy is not straightforward didactic teaching like that in the epistles. The nature of prophetic language allowed prophecies to be applied to different time periods, circumstances, and manners of fulfillment which were not apparent when the prophecies were originally uttered.

Find the meaning in context.

Imagery in the book of Revelation can be found in the OT. That establishes a context, but we must then ask how did *John* use the symbol.

Look for the prophet's pastoral concern.

For example, in Rev 2:10; 13:9-10; and 14:12 John calls his readers to steadfastness and perseverance.

Look for the main point.

Details serve to reinforce the main point the prophet is making.

Avoid sensational prophetic materials.

Those who claim to have discovered some "hidden" truth about the end times, or who have deciphered a biblical "code" usually are proven false.

Realize that many OT and some NT prophecies have already been fulfilled.

²⁶ Ibid., 973–74.

²⁷ See Green, *How to Read*, 74–79; Oropeza, *99 Reasons*, 181–83.

Fee and Stuart highlight a perhaps little-known fact regarding OT prophecy: “Less than 2 percent of Old Testament prophecy is messianic. Less than 5 percent specifically describes the New Covenant age. Less than 1 percent concerns events yet to come. The prophets *did* indeed announce the future but it was usually the immediate future of Israel, Judah, and other nations surrounding that they announced, rather than *our* future.”²⁸

Apocalyptic

During and after Judah’s exile in Babylon, a subgenre of prophecy arose called “apocalyptic.”²⁹ This genre flourished from about 250 BC until AD 200 in Jewish and then in some Christian literature. It is found in several extra-biblical writings. Apocalyptic writing in the Bible is primarily represented in the books of Daniel and Revelation (Isaiah, Ezekiel and Zechariah also contain apocalyptic elements). Common themes include history and the end of history, cosmic cataclysm, the battle between cosmic powers, the righting of wrongs, and the consummation of God’s plan and kingdom.

Apocalyptic is a particular form of prophecy. Beale states that apocalyptic “contains a heightening and more intense clustering of literary and thematic traits found in prophecy.”³⁰ Thus, all of the considerations for understanding and interpreting prophecy apply to the apocalyptic form of prophecy. Although apocalyptists focused on the end of history, contemporary historical events were significant: “In the apocalyptic perspective the contemporary scene is the stage on which God’s purpose is worked out. In this sense there is continuity between the ‘here’ and the ‘hereafter.’”³¹ Apocalyptists viewed God as sovereignly in control of history. He is moving history to his ordained end. In the consummation, God’s faithful will be delivered and rewarded. This is particularly true in a Christian apocalypse such as Revelation.

Bibliography:

Bauckham, Richard. “The Economic Critique of Rome in Revelation 18.” In *Images of Empire* (JSOTSup 122), ed. Loveday Alexander, 47–90. Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic Press, 1991.

²⁸ Fee and Stuart, *How to Read the Bible*, 150.

²⁹ The word “apocalyptic” is used both as an adjective and as a noun. Some researchers suggest that “apocalyptic” describes as certain kind of eschatology and “apocalypse” denotes a particular literary genre. See Carson and Moo, *Introduction*, 714. Most writers, however, use “apocalyptic” to signify both a literary genre and a type of eschatology. The term will be used in its broader sense here.

³⁰ Beale, *Revelation*, 37.

³¹ Green, *How to Read*, 62; see also Carson and Moo, *Introduction*, 714.

Beale, G. K. *The Book of Revelation* (NIGTC). Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999.

Carson, D. A., and Douglas Moo. *An Introduction to the New Testament*, 2nd ed. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005.

Chisholm, Robert. "When Prophecy Appears to Fail, Check Your Hermeneutic." *JETS* 53 (2010) 561-77. Online: http://www.etsjets.org/files/JETS-PDFs/53/53-3/Chisholm_JETS_53-3_pp_561-577.pdf.

Fee, Gordon, and Douglas Stuart. *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth*. Grand Rapids: Academie, 1982.

Ford, Desmond. *The Abomination of Desolation in Biblical Eschatology*. Washington, DC: University Press of America, 1979.

Gaebelein, Frank. "The Unity of the Bible." In *Revelation and the Bible: Contemporary Evangelical Thought*, edited by Carl F. H. Henry, 389–401. Grand Rapids: Baker, 1958. Online: http://www.biblicalstudies.org.uk/pdf/rev-henry/24_unity_gaebelein.pdf.

Garlington, Don. "Reigning With Christ (Revelation 20:1–6 In Its Salvation-Historical Setting)." No pages. Online: <http://www.mountainretreatorg.net/eschatology/reigning.html>.

Goldsworthy, Graeme. *According to Plan: The Unfolding Revelation of God in the Bible*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1991.

Green, Joel. *How to Read Prophecy*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1984.

Holwerda, David. "Eschatology and History: A Look at Calvin's Eschatological Vision." In *Readings in Calvin's Theology*, edited by Donald Kim, 311–42. Grand Rapids: Baker, 1984.

Irons, Lee. "Prophetic Idiom." Audio mp3. Not dated. Online: http://www.upper-register.com/mp3/TUM/55_TUM_Prophets.mp3.

Johnson, Dennis. *Him We Proclaim: Preaching Christ from All the Scriptures*. Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2007.

Kevan, E. F. "The Covenants and the Interpretation of the Old Testament." *Evangelical Quarterly* 26 (1954): 19–28. Online: http://www.biblicalstudies.org.uk/pdf/eq/1954-1_kevan.pdf.

Ladd, George Eldon. "Historic Premillennialism." In *The Meaning of the Millennium: Four Views*, edited by Robert Clouse, 17–40. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1977.

Oropeza, B. J. *99 Reasons Why No One Knows When Christ Will Return*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1994.

Poythress, Vern. "Genre and Hermeneutics in Rev 20:1–6," *JETS* 36 (1993): 41–54. Online: http://www.etsjets.org/files/JETS-PDFs/36/36-1/JETS_36-1_041-054_Poythress.pdf.

Ramm, Bernard. *Protestant Biblical Interpretation*, 3rd rev. ed. Grand Rapids: Baker, 1970.

Travis, Stephen. *I Believe in the Second Coming of Jesus*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982.

Walker, P. W. L. *Jesus and the Holy City: New Testament Perspectives on Jerusalem*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996.

VanGemeren, Willem. *Interpreting the Prophetic Word*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990.

This article is provided as a ministry of [Third Millennium Ministries](#) (Thirdmill). If you have a question about this article, please [email](#) our *Theological Editor*.

Subscribe to RPM

RPM subscribers receive an email notification each time a new issue is published. Notifications include the title, author, and description of each article in the issue, as well as links directly to the articles. Like RPM itself, *subscriptions are free*. To subscribe to [RPM](#), please select this [link](#).