

Literalizing Prophecy

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The focus of this paper is to show how “literalizing” prophecy has led to much error in the church today. In a fervor to support certain beliefs, we have forgotten that “everything that was written in the past was written to teach us.” (Rom 15:4) Most see the Old Testament as a collection of storybook examples, forgetting that the key to interpreting prophetic language is also buried there. This prevalence is especially seen in eschatology.¹

Why did the Pharisees reject Jesus as the Messiah? Even when they saw the miracles our Lord performed and heard the great truths preached, they refused to accept Him as the Son of God. Here was a group well-versed in the Mosaic Law. They were the religious elite whose lives were dedicated to those precepts. Yet their great knowledge somehow blinded them to the truth in front of them. In the end, they killed the Savior for whom they were expectantly waiting.

A great part of their error was in how they interpreted scripture. Prophecies such as Zechariah 6:12-13 and Isaiah 9:7 were viewed as literal events. These are but two examples, and there are many others. The point is, the Jews were looking for a *literal* coming of a *physical* kingdom, one that would place Israel in rule over her oppressors, and restore her former glory. The poor, humble carpenter’s son did not impress them as being the vehicle that would bring this about. Even John the Baptist struggled with this issue:

When the men came to Jesus, they said, “John the Baptist sent us to you to ask, ‘Are you the one who was to come, or should we expect someone else?’” (Luke 7:20)

Jesus said that of all men, there was no one greater than John the Baptist. (Luke 7:28) Yet this “greatest of all men” had trouble understanding the OT Messianic prophecies. John was uncertain, and even Jesus’ disciples failed time and again to understand. The Pharisees and religious leaders refused to recognize Jesus because they too misunderstood biblical prophecy. They applied a literal understanding to what they read, and erred as a result.

We today think we’re exempt, that time and hindsight has somehow provided a mantle of protection against such error. Here, Solomon’s words still ring true: *What has been will be again, what has been done will be done again; there is nothing new under the sun.* (Ecc 1:9) Yet the “modern” church has made the same mistake by literalizing certain New Testament passages. As a result, we’ve failed to recognize the true state of the kingdom and our relationship in that kingdom. We have misunderstood the Second Coming and other *spiritual* concepts by applying literal interpretations to them.

The religious community of Jesus’ day failed to recognize His first coming; today’s religious community has failed to recognize His second coming.

¹ The body of religious doctrines concerning the human soul in its relation to death, judgment, heaven, and hell. (*Encarta* dictionary) Eschatology typically concerns doctrines relating to the future and the end of mankind.

Most church of Christ folks will angrily disagree with this conclusion, claiming that they have the truth made plain between the covers of their bibles. However, even Jesus' disciples, who walked with Him for 3 years, failed to understand. At His ascension, they were still looking for a literal, physical kingdom.

They were asking Him, saying, "Lord, is it at this time You are restoring the kingdom to Israel?" (Acts 1:6)

Here was a group of men who had walked with Jesus for 3 years. How is it that we can claim to have "all truth," when even John the Baptist and those who walked with Christ failed to understand very fundamental concepts? The New Testament is full of examples of how people failed to understand Christ's word because of one simple reason: *they applied a literal interpretation to a spiritual truth*. Let's look at a few examples.

Notice the following story taken from Matthew 16:

The disciples came to the other side of the sea, but they had forgotten to bring any bread. Jesus said to them, "Watch out and beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees." They began to discuss this among themselves, saying, "He said that because we did not bring any bread." But Jesus, aware of this, said, "How is it that you do not understand that I did not speak to you concerning bread? But beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees." Then they understood that He did not say to beware of the leaven of bread, but of the teaching of the Pharisees and Sadducees. (NAS)

When Jesus spoke of leaven, the disciples took it to mean the yeast that causes bread to rise. But Jesus was referring to a *spiritual* truth, using a *physical* concept to describe it. Only after the Teacher explained it to them did they understand. Yet He *expected* them to be able to see it and they did not. This same lack of understanding is seen in the Jews when they demanded a sign from Jesus:

Jesus answered, "Destroy this temple, and in 3 days I will raise it up." Then the Jews said, "It has taken 46 years to build this temple, and will You raise it up in 3 days?" But He was speaking of the temple of His body. (John 2:19-21)

The Jews didn't understand what Jesus was saying, causing them to speculate in erroneous conclusions. When we read the New Testament, we open the door for this same error when we assign literal meaning to spiritual truths.

Another example concerns Malachi's prediction of God sending Elijah the prophet "before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the Lord." (Malachi 4:5) The disciples knew the prophecy, thinking it would be fulfilled physically. It *was* fulfilled physically, but not literally. John the Baptist came in the *spirit* of Elijah but was not *literally* Elijah.

Taking words literally caused many to stumble over Jesus' words in John 6:

Truly, truly, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink His blood, you have no life in yourselves. He who eats My flesh and drinks My blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day.” (John 6:53-54)

Jesus was clearly speaking of a spiritual reality, and yet His whole point was missed. The interpretation is seen later in Paul’s words: “In Him we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of sins, according to the riches of His grace.” (Eph 1:7)

What does it mean to be saved by Christ's blood? It’s *physical* blood in the sense that Jesus physically shed His blood, and it is that act that makes our salvation possible. But it is *spiritually* applied in baptism. (Matt 26:28 *cf.* Acts 2:38, etc)

Another example concerns the kingdom of God (or kingdom of heaven). The Bible says the kingdom was at hand. Certain aspects of the kingdom are:

- Flesh and blood cannot inherit it (1 Cor 15:50)
- It is not of this world (John 18:36)
- It does not come with observation; it is within us (Luke 17:20-21)

These are *physical* illustrations describing a *spiritual* kingdom. Amidst the difficulties of understanding the spiritual, the Jews and disciples expected a literal, material kingdom, where they would reign upon earth from Jerusalem.

The Holy Spirit says, “Don’t lean on your own understanding.” (Prov 3:5) After men could not understand Pharaoh’s dream, Joseph asked, “Do not interpretations belong to God?” (Gen 40:8) Apparently accustomed to the flim-flammery of his own spiritual counselors, Nebuchadnezzar held back on the details of his dream to ferret out the truth. (Dan 2:5ff) Only Daniel, with help from God, was able to accommodate the king.

The Old Self Still Alive and Kicking

The basis for misinterpreting the bible lies partly in our own egos, something that was supposed to die in water baptism. Lack of study, ignorance, and relying on preachers make up the rest.

One of the elders in the book of Revelation asked John, “These in white robes—who are they, and where did they come from?” To which, the apostle answered, “Sir, *you* know.” (Rev 7:13-14) In other words, either John did *not* know, or he was humbling himself before the elder. In either case, he was not “wise in his own eyes.” (Prov 3:7)

When Jesus commissioned the 70 disciples, He told them not to take a bunch of earthly possessions with them on their journey. (Matt 10:9-10) Although His reasoning behind this was that they would receive support from the communities, there was a more fundamental lesson to be learned: *Trust God*. In the same way, when we approach the Holy Word, the baggage we lug around with us—the opinions, deductions, summaries, and other “I-think-so’s”—need to be shed. Trust God’s word for the answer, not our own interpretation.

We assume that just because we're in a certain church, we're beyond error. "Our church is bible-based;" or, "our church preaches the truth;" or, "we speak where the bible speaks and are silent where it's silent." These credal statements do not guarantee pure truth. In fact, they cause most to rest in the assumption that what is taught and preached is accurate and error-free. The church is supposed to be the "pillar and support of the truth" (1 Tim 3:15).

We do not fully trust God, but "lean on our own understanding." Because of our particular church, we believe ourselves to be error-free. Because the preacher says so, it must be so. After all, he's a leader in our bible-based church. Yet when we look at five congregations in Revelation—all churches of Christ, by the way—they were in serious trouble. Christ was ready to cast most of them off for various reasons.

Like the Laodiceans, we think we're in good spiritual shape, when, in fact, we might be "wretched, miserable, poor, blind, and naked." Like those in Sardis, who depended upon their reputation, we may have a name that we're spiritually alive, when in fact, we may be in our spiritual death throes. (Rev 3:1) Can we repeat Laodicea's or Sardis' error? *What has happened will happen again.*

False Paradigms

The Encarta dictionary defines 'paradigm' as *a generally accepted model of how ideas relate to one another, forming a conceptual framework within which scientific research is carried out.*

Paradigms are formed when we apply scriptures to our already-arrived conclusions from other passages. In a very simple example, it may look like this:

- Christ is coming again, based on certain scriptures
- Therefore, Acts 1:11 refers to Christ's Second coming

For the sake of argument, the doctrine of Christ's Second Coming may be legitimate. (This is our established paradigm.) However, when we shove Acts 1:11 against that framework, we violate the scripture by asserting that it too refers to the Second Coming. Furthermore, rejecting any *other* interpretation in favor of our own causes us to miss the truth. This is seeing scripture through our paradigms instead of checking our paradigms against scripture.

Let's use Acts 1:11, where some angels are speaking to Jesus' disciples after His ascension:

"Men of Galilee," they said, "why do you stand here looking into the sky? This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen him go into heaven." (NIV)

We take this to mean, *Jesus will return in the clouds* based on our paradigm of the Second Coming. Instead of looking "up," however, we need to look "down." The verse following says, *Then they returned to Jerusalem from the hill called the Mount of Olives.* The angels weren't referring to Christ's return in the clouds, but to His return to the Mount of Olives as Zechariah prophesied:

On that day his feet will stand on the Mount of Olives, east of Jerusalem, and the Mount of Olives will be split in two from east to west, forming a great valley, with half of the mountain moving north and half moving south...On that day living water will flow out from Jerusalem, half to the eastern sea and half to the western sea, in summer and in winter. The Lord will be king over the whole earth. On that day there will be one Lord, and his name the only name. (Zech 14:4, 8-9) NIV

Thus, “in the same way” doesn’t refer to the clouds, but to Jesus’ spiritual return to establish His spiritual kingdom, the church. Christ’s “feet,” the Mount of Olives being “split,” the “valley,” “mountains moving,” “living water,” and so forth, are all spiritual concepts describing the effects of the Gospel. It refers to His return to the Mount of Olives, of the church beginning in Jerusalem, dividing nations, and the “living water” of His Spirit going out from that point of origin.

Tying Zechariah 14 to Acts 1 is a legitimate interpretation; one passage explains the other. However, interpreting Acts 1 against an arrived *conclusion* from a paradigm is wrong. Simply put, we’ve constructed a doctrine, and whenever we come to a passage using the future tense, we automatically assign it to the yet-to-be future. As a result, the Destruction of Jerusalem, the end of the Mosaic Covenant, are sniffed at as “inconsequential.” The Big Event, they claim, is yet in the future. On an individual basis, this may be true. But the bible’s focus is primarily on the human race and God’s covenant with mankind in general.

Many think that the teaching of a future Second Coming of Christ has been around since the New Testament was written. Yet the phrase, ‘Second Coming of Christ’ is nowhere found in scripture. The doctrine has enjoyed success primarily in the past few centuries, but was not a teaching familiar to “church fathers” of centuries ago.

Even some great bible commentators of recent time, who do indorse a future coming of Christ, reveal doubt on the subject.

Adam Clarke, a 17th-Century commentator, wrote, “I conclude, therefore, that this prophecy has not the least relation to Judas Maccabeus. It may be asked, to whom, and to what event does it relate? ...to the destruction of Jerusalem and the Jewish polity; *which in the Gospel is called the coming of Christ and the days of vengeance* (emphasis mine), Matthew 16:28; Luke 21:22.” (Isaiah 65, p. 513)²

John Bishop Lightfoot, a trusted commentator found in most church libraries, wrote on the Second Coming, “...it appears plain enough, that the foregoing verses are not to be understood of the last judgment but, as we said, of the destruction of Jerusalem.”³

R.C. Sproul, a current-day apologeticist⁴ who believes in a future coming of Christ, stated, “To be completely candid, I must confess that I am still unsettled on some crucial matters.”⁵

² On “The Nature of Christ's Return;” Matthew 16:27-28; Significance of A.D. 70

³ Lightfoot Vol 2, p. 320

⁴ A person dedicated to proving the truth of Christianity

⁵ *Last Days*, pp. 157-158

Clarke, Lightfoot and Sproul are all advocates of a future coming of Christ. Yet their integrity stands out in respect to their humility of understanding. Many preachers would do well to emulate this approach instead of speaking boldly on matters they so confidently affirm but know little about.

Time in the Bible

Time only exists for created things. For humans, it is learned, a measurement of duration expressed in progressively experienced events. As such, we tend to view everything on a linear scale. We all have a “tape measure,” where birth is at one end and death is at the other. Life’s events are sprinkled between these two points. Unfortunately, the assumption that spiritual matters are also linear gets us into trouble when it comes to understanding the bible.

Time is factored into God’s plans only in regards to His purposes. The plan of redemption was “predetermined and known beforehand” by God. (Acts 2:23) The closest God comes to determining any fixed periods of time are seen in such phrases as, “the day of the Lord,” “in that day,” “the day of judgment,” etc.

Certain passages, such as Psalms 22, describe Christ’s crucifixion and subsequent rule as a singular event. Although the plan of redemption is “chopped up” into stages, they make up parts of a whole. Notice how God views Time in an Old Testament setting:

“How long will you grieve over Saul, since I have rejected him from being king over Israel? Fill your horn with oil and go; I will send you to Jesse the Bethlehemite, for I have selected a king for Myself among his sons.” (1 Sam 16:1) NAS

David’s reign over Israel was 40-years in the future. Yet Saul had *already* been rejected as king, and God had *already* chosen David. The promise was as certain as if it had already taken place.

Concerning events such as the resurrection, eternal life, the destruction of the “old heavens and earth,” our natural inclination is to place them at the *end* of time. Yet note Jesus’ statement to Nicodemus:

“He who believes in the Son has eternal life ; but he who does not obey the Son will not see life, but the wrath of God abides on him.” (John 3:36)

In a *legalistic* sense, we have eternal life now, and sinners are already doomed. The future inheritance of both camps is as real now as it is when they take possession of their reward or punishment later. Time has nothing to do with the possession, death being the seal of whatever destiny we’ve chosen.

Paul said, “our citizenship is in heaven, from which also we eagerly wait for a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ.” (Phil 3:20) The Thessalonians had “turned to God from idols to serve a living and true God, and to wait for His Son from heaven.” (1 Thess 1:9-10) We automatically take this to mean “to wait for His Son *who is coming* from heaven.”

What did Paul mean by “waiting for His Son”? We are *spiritually* in heaven now, but not literally. And it is from there that the Thessalonians were waiting for Christ, not in some futuristic epiphany on the earth. In our Second Coming paradigm, we assume it to mean waiting for Christ’s return several thousand years hence. We forget that two covenants were in the process of eclipsing. Minimizing that process is a grave mistake.

Paul told the church of Christ at Rome, “The God of peace *will soon* crush Satan under your feet.” (Rom 16:20) How would the church there have felt if they saw Satan being crushed thousands of years hence? What comfort would that have brought them? He said that Satan would be crushed under *their* feet, not ours. This relates to Jesus’ statement, “I was watching Satan fall from heaven like lightning.” (Luke 10:18) The end of the Devil’s rule was imminent, not in some far-distant future.

John wrote, “Children, *it is the last hour*; and just as you heard that antichrist is coming, even now many antichrists have appeared; *from this we know that it is the last hour*. (1 John 2:18-19) He went on to say, “it is *already* in the world.” (1 John 4:3) How long was this ‘hour’ to last? Any place ‘hour’ is used, it means ‘immediate.’

The Hebrew writer, seeing the time was at hand, wrote, “Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another—and *all the more as you see the Day approaching*. (Heb 10:25) “The Day” is defined by numerous other scriptures as pertaining to God’s divorce from apostate Israel and the establishment of the church. However, we stubbornly force the text to mean “don’t miss Sunday morning worship services because Christ could come at any day.” We throw away all verses defining the text and make childish application to them instead.

A war was going on, both on heaven and earth, and the outcome was “close at hand,” a term used in various forms throughout scripture. Revelation is rife with the expression, “I am coming quickly,” another prophecy speaking of the end of one age and the beginning of a new. Yet the church insists on relegating the last few chapters of Revelation to some future heaven, when they actually describe the church-kingdom within the gospel dispensation.

Of the 76 times (NAS) ‘quick’ and ‘quickly’ are used in scripture, we concur with the common usage. But because of our paradigm, the 6 times ‘quickly’ is used in Revelation, we take it to mean “thousands of years in the future.” This is inconsistent; scripture needs to interpret scripture.

Futurists are quick to seize upon Peter’s verse, “with the Lord one day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years like one day.” (2 Pet 3:8) Peter was speaking of a principle, not defining terminology. Peter’s statement does not interpret how we should understand fundamental words such as ‘quickly,’ but illustrates that God is not influenced by time.

By twisting such scriptures, we infer that God doesn’t mean what He says, that He’s deceitful. “In Him there is no darkness.” (1 John 1:5) The Holy Spirit used simple pictures and parables to describe some complicated spiritual principles. God did not deviate from that principle in the NT by writing the opposite of what He meant.

Jesus told the church at Thyatira, “what you have, hold fast until I come.” (Rev 2:25) Are the Thyatirans still waiting for Christ? Not likely, since that congregation disappeared nearly 1900 years ago.

He also told the church at Sardis, “If you do not wake up, I will come like a thief, and you will not know at what hour I will come to you.” (Rev 3:3) Some say that this was a provisional coming, that if they *did* wake up, He would not come. This is in error. Their spiritual sleep would cause them to not *see* Christ’s coming, a situation that has continued to this day.

The argument that Jesus was providing an “incentive” for these churches to remain faithful paints God as a deceiver. It’s akin to Him holding out a carrot on a stick, the church forever marching on into the future, trying to grasp onto something that’s only meant to keep them going. This discredits any faith, and ties our hope to a frustrating expectation.

In our fleshly mind, it is impossible to “see” Christ’s coming as anything but physical. Because His coming wasn’t physical, and it didn’t come “with observation,” we assume it didn’t happen, and we therefore shove it into the future.

Even the immature Thessalonian church understood that Christ’s coming wasn’t to be physically observed or experienced. Paul told them, not to be “unsettled or alarmed by some prophecy...saying that the day of the Lord has already come.” (2 Thess 2:2) If they had interpreted Christ’s Second Coming like we teach today, they would not have suffered such alarm. “Anybody seen Jesus in the clouds? No? Guess that report is bogus.” However, they knew it was spiritual and unseen, and had been upset that they might have missed it.

Modern-day Preachers—the Bane of the Church

If preachers would do more teaching and less yelling, perhaps we wouldn’t be in the shape we’re in. While the NT teaches that we are in God’s kingdom *now*, that we have “confidence to enter the holy place,” that we stand in the heavenly assembly *now*, preachers still lead us to believe that this all awaits us in the future. That is why there is little personal spiritual growth, no desire for self-study, and a dependence upon ritualistic worship.

Those who consider themselves as “rightly handling the word of truth,” should step back, and take James’ advice to heart: do more listening and less talking (James 1:19).

Certain New Testament verses—as plain as they are—do nothing to convince the brethren to reconsider their position. Note Jesus’ words:

All men will hate you because of me, but he who stands firm to the end will be saved. When you are persecuted in one place, flee to another. I tell you the truth, you will not finish going through the cities of Israel before the Son of Man comes. (Matt 10:22-23)

Preachers take the sentence, “All men will hate you because of me, but he who stands firm to the end will be saved,” and then yell for 30 minutes on how we need to stand faithful until death. Never do they refer to the disciples remaining faithful until the Second Coming.

For the Son of Man is going to come in his Father's glory with his angels, and then he will reward each person according to what he has done. I tell you the truth, some who are standing here will not taste death before they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom. (Matt 16:27-28)

Same scenario. The preacher will holler at his congregation that “Jesus is coming with His angels, and we’ll all be taken away into the clouds (another prophetic metaphor)...etc.” Not once will they say that this happened before the disciples died, which is what our Lord plainly said.

The old argument, “it happened spiritually ‘back then’ but it will be fulfilled literally in the future” has no scriptural foundation. The dual fulfillment of prophecy stands mainly on already-formed paradigms.

Another argument is, “If the Second Coming has already happened, why are we here on earth? Where is our hope?”

Is not being the light of the world, so that people can see our good works and thereby glorify God (Matt 5:14-16) our purpose? To proclaim the gospel in both word and deed? Are we to place the hope of eternal life as secondary to Christ’s coming?

This “hope” for which the church has been waiting for thousands of years—a glorious, fiery coming in earth’s clouds—will only benefit a hand-full of lucky Christians at the end of the world. And for all that time, the world has looked at the bible and the church as unconvincing because we’ve badly mangled the coming of Christ doctrine.

The doctrine of Christ’s Second Coming may be seen as a matter of faith in some Christians’ eyes. Like the Pharisees who sought to kill Jesus over His teachings, and who sought to kill Paul for changing his doctrine, brethren whose viewpoints don’t agree with ours have been disfellowshipped and black-listed. On a positive note, congregations such as the Raines Road Church of Christ in Memphis, Tennessee, promote the past-fulfillment, or preterist view of Christ’s coming. They are among the minority.

Instead of blindly holding to tradition, we need to humble ourselves before the truth of God’s word and take it to mean what it says, not what we want it to say. The future coming of Jesus in the clouds is an escapist’s dream, not a biblical truth.

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