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Should Bible Prophecy Be Interpreted Literally?

Luke 1:30-33

By Laurence A. Justice

One of the outstanding characteristics of Biblical religion is the predictive prophecy of the Bible. Only God's word makes prophecies. None of the sacred books of other religions contain predictive prophecy. Only God knows the future and in his Word he declares the end from the beginning as He says in Isaiah 46:10.

The Bible is preeminently a book of prophecy. There are 6,000 verses of prophecy in it, about 3,000 of which have already been fulfilled. The other 3,000 will be fulfilled in the years to come. Fully one-fourth of God's word was prophecy when it was written. More scripture is prophetic than anything else. Seventeen of the thirty-nine books of the Old Testament are prophetic besides the numerous prophetic passages in the Pentateuch and the Psalms. In the New Testament whole chapters in the Gospels, many passages in Paul's letters and the whole book of Revelation are given to prophecy.

Yet many believers today neglect the study of prophecy either because they see it as difficult or they are told that it has already been fulfilled. I believe with the apostle Paul that *“All scripture is given by inspiration of God and is profitable...”* and that therefore we must study prophecy because it is part of the Scriptures, an important part!

Christ is the center of the Bible. The central focus of the messages of the prophets is the two comings of Christ to this world. Nobody knew 500 years ago that George Washington would be born

or 200 years ago that Ronald Reagan would be born. Only God can give details about a man before he is born. In God's word we have a man, Jesus Christ, described hundreds and even thousands of years before he was born by not one but 20 or 25 men who had never seen the man they were describing.

Some people allegorize or spiritualize the prophetic Scriptures, thus giving them meanings other than that suggested by the plain sense of the words. Such interpretation of prophecy can be traced in history back to the Bible School at Alexandria, in Egypt, that reached its peak in the second century AD under the leadership of such early Christian fathers as Clement of Alexandria and Origen. This school began to interpret the scriptures allegorically rather than literally. Origen considered the literal sense of Scripture as unimportant and unedifying. In his mind the only value of the literal record of God's Word was to serve as a vehicle for figurative meaning.

To this day the allegorical method of interpreting Scripture invented by the School at Alexandria still plagues Christianity in both the Amillennial and Post Millennial camps. These people interpret God's Word by, as they call it, spiritualizing that word in order to come up with the true meaning. Charles Feinberg said,

“When the plain sense of the scripture makes common sense, seek no other sense; therefore take every word at its primary, ordinary, usual literal meaning unless the facts of the immediate context studied in light of related passages and axiomatic and fundamental truths, indicate clearly otherwise.”

“The word ‘spiritual’ is often used like a fairy's wand to touch difficult passages and thereby change from the obvious and literal into a spiritual and fanciful meaning.”

The literal interpretation of scripture is the crux of the whole argument between Amillennialism and Premillennialism. The millennium refers to the 1,000 year period mentioned in Revelation chapter 20 when Jesus Christ will reign on this earth from Jerusalem. *Pre* means before and a Premillennialist is one who believes that Jesus Christ will come back to this earth pre or before the 1,000 year kingdom is established on this earth. *A* means no. An Atheist believes there is no God and an Amillennialist believes there will be no millennium, no 1,000 reign of Christ on this earth. Amillennialists use a principle of interpretation of prophecy called “spiritualizing” that destroys the obvious meaning of the language and substitutes a meaning that does not appear on the surface of the text. Premillennialists tend to a more literal interpretation of the prophetic portions of God's word.

How then shall we interpret God's word? Shall we interpret Bible prophecy literally or figuratively? The first thing I want us to consider in this message is the question...

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What Does Literal Interpretation Mean?

When we deal with methods of interpreting God's word, we are delving into the field of hermeneutics, the science of Biblical interpretation. Literal interpretation means the Scriptures must be understood according to the normal, historical, socially accustomed use of the words. Each passage of scripture should be taken in its proper, natural sense unless the context demands otherwise.

Those who interpret the Scriptures literally take the words literally unless they are clearly shown by the context to be otherwise intended. God's word is meant to be symbolic only when the context makes it obvious that it is symbolic! God's word should be understood literally in the same way any literary piece should be understood.

A. T. Robertson, the great Baptist Greek Scholar, wrote what has come to be known as the Golden Rule of Scripture Interpretation. "When the plain sense of the scripture makes common sense, seek no other sense; therefore take every word at its primary, ordinary, usual literal meaning unless the facts of the immediate context studied in light of related passages and axiomatic and fundamental truths, indicate clearly otherwise."

Like all other areas of God's Word, prophecy is to be interpreted literally. Most of God's Word is perspicuous and clear as to its meaning. God has not used words in the Scriptures that can only confuse the ignorant. It is never wrong to assume that the language of Scripture was intended to make its readers understand its meaning. It is those who reject the face value of Biblical language who must assume the burden of proof as to their means of interpretation.

How Do We Know That Bible Prophecy Is To Be Interpreted Literally?

We know this because the Bible prophecies that have already been fulfilled have all been fulfilled literally. The only way to know how God will fulfill prophecy in the future is to find out how he has done so in the past. The prophecies that have already been fulfilled are our pattern for interpreting the prophe-

cies that relate to the future. The greatest proof of the validity of literal interpretation of prophecy is the fact that the prophecies that have already been fulfilled were literally fulfilled. Hundreds of prophecies in God's Word have been literally fulfilled hundreds of years after they were uttered and written. No prophecy that has already been fulfilled has been fulfilled in any other way than literally! All the prophecies of Christ's first coming were literally fulfilled. Why then should we expect those prophecies concerning his second coming to be fulfilled in any other way? The common sense way to find out how God will fulfill prophecy in the future is to find out how he has fulfilled it in the past.

There are a number of great prophetic events that are still in the future if we take Bible prophecy literally. There is the universal apostasy, the revelation of the personal Antichrist, the return of Israel to her land, the conversion of all Israel, the Battle of Armageddon, the return of the Lord Jesus Christ in power and glory and the reign of Christ on this earth for a thousand years. If Jesus Christ came and literally fulfilled the prophecies of a suffering Savior, will he not just as surely come and likewise fulfill the prophecies of a glorified Messiah, reigning in power and glory over the earth as predicted in Psalm 2, Psalm 72, Daniel 7:13-14 and Isaiah 9,11 and 60? There is no fact or principle that does away with the literal sense of the return of Christ, or the return of Israel to her land, or the glorious kingdom of Christ that is coming on this earth!

Some Examples of Bible Prophecies That Must Be Interpreted Literally

There are the prophecies concerning the return of Jesus Christ to this earth. The prophecies of Christ's first coming were all fulfilled literally.

- Genesis 3:15 prophesied that Messiah would be of the seed of the woman.
- Genesis 12:3 prophesied that Christ would be of the seed of Abraham.
- Isaiah 7:14 prophesied that Christ would be born of a virgin.
- Micah 5:2 prophesied that Christ would be born at Bethlehem.

- Zechariah 9:9 prophesied his entry into Jerusalem on an ass.
- Psalm 41:9 prophesied that Christ would be betrayed by a friend.
- Zechariah 11:12 prophesied that he would be sold for thirty pieces of silver.
- Psalm 22:2 prophesied that he would be abandoned by his Father at the cross.
- Psalm 22:7-9 prophesied that he would be scorned and scoffed at by the people.
- Psalm 22:16 prophesied that his hands and his feet would be pierced.
- Psalm 22:18 prophesied that the soldiers would part his garments among them and draw lots for his clothing.
- Isaiah 53:3 prophesied that he would be scorned and rejected by the people.
- Isaiah 53:7-8 prophesied that he would be mistreated and would experience anguish.
- Isaiah 53:9 prophesied that he would be executed among the wicked.
- Isaiah 53:9 prophesied that he would be buried in the grave of a rich man.
- Psalm 34:20 prophesied that at the cross not a bone of him would be broken.
- Psalm 69:21 prophesied that at the cross they would give him vinegar and gall to drink.
- Psalm 16:10 and Jonah 1:17 prophesied his resurrection from the dead after three days and nights.

All of these prophecies and hundreds of others concerning his first coming were literally fulfilled! In light of this we have every reason to believe that the prophecies concerning his Second Coming will also be literally fulfilled.

This is especially true when prophecies concerning Christ's first and second comings are combined in the same passage of Scripture such as is the case in our text in Luke 1:30-33. The first part of this prophecy, that in verse 31, has been literally fulfilled. "*And, behold, thou shalt conceive in thy womb, and bring forth a son, and shalt call his name JESUS.*" The angel prophesied here that Mary would conceive and bare a son and would call that son's name Jesus. These

things literally happened just as they were prophesied.

The second part of this passage will, by any rule of proper interpretation of Scripture, be fulfilled literally as well. Look at verses 32-33. "...the Lord God shall give unto him the throne of his father David: And he shall reign over the house of Jacob for ever; and of his kingdom there shall be no end." If we believe verse 31 was literally fulfilled, we must also believe that verses 32-33 will be literally fulfilled. The prophecy in this text requires that Christ will literally reign over the house of Jacob on the throne of David.

Isaiah 9:6-7 says, "For unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given: and the government shall be upon his shoulder: and his name shall be called Wonderful, Counsellor, The mighty God, The everlasting Father, The Prince of Peace. Of the increase of his government and peace there shall be no end, upon the throne of David, and upon his kingdom, to order it, and to establish it with judgment and with justice from henceforth even for ever. The zeal of the LORD of hosts will perform this." We know that a son was literally given and a child was literally born. Therefore proper interpretation would mean that he shall literally govern from the throne of David and reign in peace and justice.

God's word prophesies that Jesus Christ will literally return to this earth and a number of things in connection with that return.

- I Thessalonians 4:16 prophesies that he will return personally.
- John 5:28 prophesies that the dead will hear his voice.
- Zechariah 14:4 prophesies that he will stand on the Mount of Olives at Jerusalem when he comes.
- II Thessalonians 1:8 prophesies that he will come in flaming fire.
- Matthew 24:29-30 prophesies that he will come in the clouds of heaven.
- Job 19:25 prophesies that he will stand on this earth.
- Jude 14 prophesies that his saints will come with him when he returns.
- Revelation 1:7 prophesies that every

eye shall see him when he comes.

- II Thessalonians 2:8-12 prophesies that he will destroy the Antichrist when he comes.
 - Isaiah 45:23 prophesies that every knee shall bow to him when he comes.
 - Matthew 19:28 prophesies that the apostles will sit on 12 thrones, judging the 12 tribes of Israel when he comes.
- Revelation 2:27 prophesies that he will rule all nations with a rod of iron. The sufferings prophesied for Christ were literally fulfilled and the prophesied glory that shall follow shall also be literally fulfilled.

Some other examples of Bible prophesies that must be interpreted literally are those passages concerning the millennium. Both Old and New Testament prophesies foretell a future earthly kingdom of righteousness and peace on this earth and this will be Christ's kingdom. Isaiah 2:2-4 says, "And it shall come to pass in the last days, that the mountain of the LORD'S house shall be established in the top of the mountains, and shall be exalted above the hills; and all nations shall flow unto it. And many people shall go and say, Come ye, and let us go up to the mountain of the LORD, to the house of the God of Jacob; and he will teach us of his ways, and we will walk in his paths: for out of Zion shall go forth the law, and the word of the LORD from Jerusalem. And he shall judge among the nations, and shall rebuke many people: and they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks: nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more."

Daniel 7:14 also prophesies this kingdom. "And there was given him dominion, and glory, and a kingdom, that all people, nations, and languages, should serve him: his dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and his kingdom that which shall not be destroyed."

The 20th chapter of Revelation also prophesies this future kingdom of Christ on the earth. Revelation 20:1-4, "And I saw an angel come down from heaven, having the key of the bottomless pit and a great chain in his hand. And he laid

hold on the dragon, that old serpent, which is the Devil, and Satan, and bound him a thousand years, And cast him into the bottomless pit, and shut him up, and set a seal upon him, that he should deceive the nations, no more, till the thousand years should be fulfilled: and after that he must be loosed a little season. And I saw thrones, and they sat upon them, and judgment was given unto them: and I saw the souls of them that were beheaded for the witness of Jesus, and for the word of God, and which had not worshipped the beast, neither his image, neither had received his mark upon their foreheads, or in their hands; and they lived and reigned with Christ a thousand years." God's Word prophesies here that the reign of Christ on this earth will be for a literal time period of 1,000 years.

Our Amillennial friends deny that such a kingdom will ever exist and interpret the prophesies concerning it in a non-literal sense, applying them to the church during this age. Most people will agree that in Revelation 20 the angel, heaven, the pit, Satan, the nations, the resurrections mentioned are all literal. Why then must the Amillennialists spiritualize or allegorize the 1,000 years in this chapter rather than taking it literally? It is an inconsistent interpretation to accept the literalness of all these other things in Revelation 20 and then to deny the literalness of the time element! A thousand years means a thousand years! This is the natural, ordinary meaning of the language.

The earliest commentators on Revelation 20 took it literally and not figuratively; men like Irenaeus and Hippolytus and Tertullian and Victorinus, and Justin Martyr. This was in the 2nd century. The allegorical and spiritualizing method, invented by the School at Alexandria, put an end to literal interpretation of Revelation 20 for a long time. Augustine who lived in the 4th century and helped father the Catholic church taught that the millennium is to be interpreted spiritually as fulfilled in the Christian church. To Augustine the millennium is the time between the two comings of Christ.

Verses 1-3 of Revelation 20 prophesies the binding of Satan with a chain and

his being cast into the bottomless pit for a thousand years. Augustine taught that the binding of Satan took place during the earthly ministry of our Lord and that Satan has since that time been bound. But here in Revelation 20 the binding of Satan is done by an angel acting on orders from heaven, not by the Lord Jesus himself and when we look at the activities of Satan in the world today there are absolutely no signs that he has been bound. The TV news every day reveals more activities of Satan that can be imagined by us. Look at world affairs! The nations are still being deceived by Satan and more so as time passes. Satan's opposition to the preaching of the gospel is getting worse, not better. The gospel is being increasingly rejected in the so-called Christian nations today while false gospels are being readily accepted. One time I told my father that I had heard the famous Southern Baptist preacher Herschel Hobbs say that Satan has already been bound and he replied, "Hmmm! Must have a mighty long chain!"

Some Examples of Scriptures That Must Be Interpreted Figuratively

Literal interpretation of Scripture does not deny that there are figurative and symbolic elements in Bible prophecy. When there are compelling reasons in the scripture itself for figurative meanings, they should be readily adopted.

Each passage of God's Word explains much of itself by its own context. The following passages of scripture are obviously figurative in their meaning: Genesis 49:9 says Judah is a lion's whelp. That's figurative language! Proverbs 23:2 says, "...put a knife to thy throat..." This would be absurd and immoral if taken literally. Nebuchadnezzar's metallic image with head of gold, chest and arms of silver, torso of brass, legs of iron and feet of iron mixed with clay is figurative and represents the great world empires of Babylon, Persia, Greece and Rome.

In John 7:38-39 Jesus says, "*He that believeth on me, as the scripture hath said, out of his belly shall flow rivers of living water. (But this spake he of the Spirit, which they that believe on him should receive: for the Holy Ghost was not yet given;...)*" "...out of his belly shall flow rivers of living water." is figurative and it is explained to be figurative when the very next verse in the context goes on to say, "...this spake he of the Spirit,..."

When we read in the book of Daniel 7:19 of Rome being the fourth beast, "...**exceeding dreadful, whose teeth were of iron, and his nails of brass;...**" this obviously does not mean that one day the world would see a creature of this physical description. This outward ugliness and fierceness speaks figuratively of the strength and fierceness and cruelty of Rome as an empire.



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