Wrestling with Eschatological Prophecy

Let's assume you are studying a prophetic passage. It seems that it does not simply predict a historical event in a literal way. It sounds too good (or too devastating) to be true for any period in the past. So you suspect that the passage is about the distant future, that it is what I would call *eschatological* prophecy; there is a relationship with what is usually referred to as the end times. What do you do?

PRINCIPLE 1 and 2 - Study the passage in its historical context, following principles of inductive Bible study. Often, you will be dealing with poetry. What is the picture the prophet is painting? How would the original audience have understood it? Interpret poetry as poetry (not as scientific prose), but leave your eschatological views out of consideration until you are ready to apply principle 4.

PRINCIPLE 3 – Where the prophet is speaking of the future: identify what devices he has used to describe this future:

Does he make reference to past events (past from the perspective of the prophet), such as the exodus, David's reign, or Solomon's golden age? David is the inspiration of many prophecies concerning the coming king or messiah. The return from exile became a pattern for redemption even before it happened. **THE PAST IS PATTERN FOR THE FUTURE**.

Does the prophet make use of **REVERSAL OF THE PRESENT**? In the future, the negative things of past or present will be turned around. Sin will be turned into righteousness, shame into glory, instead of the nations possessing Israel, Israel will possess the nations.

Is the future described in terms of the **COVENANT BLESSING**?

Determine if and how the passage displays **FORESHORTENING**. The prophets often describe events within history in the light of events at the end, without discerning between the two. When we realize that the one is a type and foreshadowing of the other, and that the historical can be considered a breaking in of the eschatological, it becomes understandable that the prophets see no essential difference between the historical and the eschatological; these two belong together.

Thus, Isaiah 40-66 describes the return from exile in Babylon (fulfilled after 538 BC), and simultaneously describes salvation in Christ and the coming glory. Passages on the day of the Lord often contain such a double reference to a historical event and to the final judgment. Both these elements can be recognized, but they cannot be separated. One result of this is that it becomes impossible to make a timetable of end times events based on the prophets.

PRINCIPLE 4 - When you have completed your observation and interpretation (that is, you understand to some extend what was on the prophet's mind), you need to engage in theological interpretation: interpret the passage in the light of the New Testament. This involves the following principles:

- Interpretation should be **CHRIST-CENTERED**. That does not mean that every other word must be seen as a reference to Jesus. It means that in God's plan for the future everything stands in relationship to Christ ('in Christ') and nothing is accomplished apart from him.

- Interpretation should be ***EKKLESIA*-CENTERED**. This principle is obviously controversial, but in my opinion this is the inescapable conclusion from the New Testament. Jesus has redrawn the boundary around the people of God, not on the basis of ethnic descent and commitment to the Mosaic Law, but on the basis of faith in him. According to Ephesians 2, the Gentile believers have been adopted as full citizens into this people of God. The borders have been enlarged; what was promised to Israel in the New Testament is now available for all people. This makes all believers, whether Jews or Gentiles, descendants of Abraham and they all share in the fulfillment of the promise in all its aspects. Prophetic fulfillment does not center on a piece of land in the Middle East, but on this worldwide community of the redeemed, the *ekklesia*,[1] and the land promise finds its ultimate fulfilment in the age to come, when the meek inherit the earth. There is room for a national Israel, too, but not as a special, much less privileged class. In Christ, we all share in the privilege.

- Interpretation should be **KINGDOM-CENTERED**, and therefore in terms of **ALREADY AND NOT YET**. In their visions of the future, the prophets describe the kingdom of God and the new age. We have already begun to enjoy the benefits of this new reality (and therefore of the prophetic promise), but only in part, since we still await its completion.

- Interpretation should be **TYPOLOGICAL** where the New Testament makes that necessary. It should take into account that the prophets often predicted in the language and concepts of their own time, and in terms of the Old Testament dispensation (temple, sacrifice, Levites, Land). In these cases a literalistic interpretation may totally miss the point. We have to interpret these things as the New Testament interprets them.

Wilrens Hornstra, 1994, 2002-2026. Create a Learning Site, www.wilrens.org.

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[1] The question, „But what about ethnic Israel?" is complex and cannot be answered here. However, the formulation above excludes Dispensationalism and Christian Zionism as well as 'Replacement Theology'. Dispensationalism and Christian Zionism apply the promises and salvation oracles to physical Israel and virtually read the Old Testament prophets as if the New Testament had not intervened, leading to a separation between Israel and the Church. All three extremes overlook the foundational unity that exists between the *ekklesia* or the people of God of the Old and the New Testament. The church of the New Testament is not something new that stands next to the old (as in Dispensationalism), nor is it something new that replaces the old (as in 'Replacement Theology').

A FEW QUOTATIONS:

All language about the future, as any economist or politician will tell you, is simply a set of signposts pointing into a fog … All our language about future states of the world and of ourselves consists of complex pictures that may or may not correspond very well to the ultimate reality. But that doesn't mean it's anybody's guess or that every opinion is as good as every other one. And – supposing someone came forward out of the fog to meet us?

N.T. Wright, *Surprised by Hope: Rethinking Heaven, the Resurrection, and the Mission of the Church* (New York: HarperCollins, 2008), xiiif.

How does the language of prophecy work? When people are nearly blind, we increase the font size. When people are nearly deaf, we turn up the volume. When people are mentally handicapped, we use visuals. The audience of prophetic language was sometimes blind, sometimes deaf and often mentally handicapped.

D.B. Sandy, *Plowshares and Pruning Hooks: Rethinking the Language of Biblical Prophecy and Apocalyptic* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2002), p. 73.

[After listing elements used in describing the second coming:] The various images for the return of Jesus raise an important question. Are we to take a synoptic approach and seek to imagine an event encompassing all of the imagery? Does a complete picture of the parousia include all of the above accompanying details? Or is the function of these images to communicate that it will be startling, unique, wonderful – and beyond description?

Ibid., p. 171.

This collection of excerpts from prophecies yet to be fulfilled highlights an important characteristic of prophecy and apocalyptic: it is a stained-glass window, not a crystal ball. Under divine inspiration, the sanctified imagination of the biblical prophets communicated the themes of God's future judgment and blessing with vivid images. Look at the imagery and admire it, but do not attempt to see through the stained glass to what is off in the distance. The function of the prophets' language was to draw attention to basic ideas about the future, not to reveal precisely what will happen and when it will happen.

Ibid., p. 184.

While many have assumed that prophecy reveals specific scenarios of future events, we may need to rethink those approaches. Futurespeak is rich in poetic imagery … Reading and hearing the words of prophecy should thrill every faithful follower with a hope focused on the Christ of prophecy But the compelling urge of modern people to know everything, including the future, must not lead us astray from the real purpose of prophecy …

Prophecy and apocalyptic, then, are not suitable for microscopes, so that we might scope out specific details of the future. But they are suitable for macroscopes, because they allow us to see the big picture of how God will bring to conclusion the present era and establish the kingdom of eternity.

Ibid., p. 188f.