

CHAPTER 4

SPECIAL HERMENEUTICS

This chapter of notes will briefly discuss several areas in the Bible which involve special kinds of exegesis because of the specialized nature of the material. Several of these issues will be revisited later in the course.

OT quotations in the NT

This topic is listed first because it is not only important for the interpretation of many portions of the NT, but because it also provides a model—a “biblical method” of exegesis.

Texts and sources

Most Greek New Testaments place OT quotes in bold print, with different degrees of selectivity:

- UBS Greek text—contains a double index (OT order, NT order), containing quotations and allusions
- Nestle-Aland Greek text—contains a thorough list in OT order

There are several collections of these quotations, arranged in parallel columns:

- Thomas Hartwell Horne, *Introduction to the Scriptures* (8th ed., 1839), 2/1: pp. 281-323
- C. H. Toy, *Quotations in the NT*
- Robert G. Bratcher, *OT Quotations in the NT* (UBS; rev. ed., 1961; uses the ERV)
- Gleason L. Archer and G. C. Chirlichigno, *OT Quotations in the NT: A Complete Survey* (1983)

Current trends

Evangelical scholars now are debating this issue. It has important ramifications for the doctrine of the inerrancy of Scripture, as well as for exegesis.

- Richard Longenecker, *Biblical Exegesis in the Apostolic Period* (1975). Longenecker maintains that many NT quotes of the OT, while supporting a proper conclusion, employ exegetical principles from Judaism which we cannot and should not use.
- On the other hand, S. Lewis Johnson, Jr., *The Old Testament in the New* (1980) deals with several “difficult” cases, showing the importance of literal interpretation with the recognition of genuine typology in the historical situation of the OT.
- See also Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., *The Uses of the OT in the New* (1985); and Darrell L. Bock, “Evangelicals and the Use of the OT in the New, Parts 1 and 2” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 142:567-68 (July-Sept. and Oct.-Dec., 1985); R. T. France, *Jesus and the Old Testament: His Application of Old Testament Passages to Himself and His Mission* (1971; reprint 1982).

Suggested approach

Rather than assuming that the NT writer is lifting the OT quote out of context, or using it in some sort of improper sense, we should look deeper to see the theological connection between the two passages.

It is helpful to assume that the OT passage as quoted in the NT, has the same meaning that it has in its OT context. With that in mind, often we can see that the NT passage takes on a richer meaning itself. (E.g., John Battle, “Paul’s Use of the OT in Romans 9:25-26,” *Grace Theological Journal* 2:1 [Spring, 1981], 115-29).

[More discussion in notes, ch. 5]

Prophecy

This is probably one of the most disputed areas of biblical interpretation. This disagreement stems from the nature of the subject: prophetic language often is more obscure than historical narrative, and the events predicted are not so readily identifiable, and are perhaps still in the future.

Prediction as possible

It is necessary to recognize that God can, and in fact did, predict the future. Much debate is based on the opposite presupposition (e.g., the meaning of Daniel's four kingdoms, the meaning of the Olivet Discourse in the three Synoptic gospels).

Recognition of fulfilled prophecies

Many OT and NT predictions have already been fulfilled. This can be seen from the events themselves (Dan 11; Jn. 21), or from specific notices in the Bible (Isa 7:14 in Matthew).

Unless there is reason to believe otherwise, we should assume that fulfilled prophecies do not require a second fulfillment.

“Double fulfillment” as a concept introduces a dangerous element into exegesis; it is better to recognize the valid element of typology in those few cases when it seems called for (e.g., in Ps 69:21).

Literal nature of prophecy

In cases where it can be tested, biblical prophecy seems to follow the normal pattern of literal exegesis, within the normal parameters of figurative language (e.g., Daniel's beasts, which nonetheless represent literal kingdoms).

Here are some examples of prophecies that were fulfilled literally, even when from the prophecy alone we might not have expected such a literal fulfillment:

- Josiah and priests' bones (1 Kgs 13:2-3; 2 Kgs 23:15-16)
- Jesus riding on donkey (Zech 9:9; Matt 21:5)
- Jesus' virgin birth (Isa 7:14; Matt 1:22-23)
- National judgments on Israel, Babylon, Tyre, etc. (see many examples in John Urquhart, *Wonders of Prophecy* [1925])
- Thirty pieces of silver to betray Jesus (Zech 11:11-12; Matt 27:9)
- Peter's manner of death (John 21:18-19)
- Paul's arrest in Jerusalem (Acts 21:11, 30, 33)
- Destruction of Jerusalem (Luke 21:6, 20)

In many of these cases one would not expect or require such a literal fulfillment as actually occurred.

Symbolic language

In spite of the general literal nature of prophecy, there is in many cases an increase in the level of figurative language employed to describe literal events, persons, or nations. This is especially evident in several OT prophets such as Daniel and Zechariah; and in the NT in Revelation. When the text itself does not explain the symbolism (as it does in Rev 17, for example), one must be cautious when interpreting the details of the prophecy.

Often certain symbols have a fairly constant meaning throughout various books, as “horn” being a symbol of strength or kingly power.

Apotelesmatic nature of prophecy

Many prophecies in the Bible are “viewed from a distance,” i.e., are seen with no apparent break between them. Fulfillment is often flexible, with longer or shorter gaps between the events, as in Isa 7.

This feature of prophecy serves a purpose: it prevents date setting. God is free in history; he is not tied down to a written time schedule; and man’s response is not prejudiced.

Charity in interpreting prophecy

The prophetic portions of Scripture are among the most difficult to interpret. For this reason they should not provide the basis for needless division and strife in the church. “Let each be fully persuaded in his own mind.”

Relation of prophecy to different eschatological schemes

In general the different eschatological viewpoints handle prophecy with different degrees of literalness.

- Amillennialism (old style)
- Amillennialism (new style)
- Postmillennialism

- Historic premillennialism
- Dispensational premillennialism

Of course, within each category various interpreters employ different degrees of literal vs. allegorical or figurative interpretation.

Helpful books

Here are some books on prophetic interpretation from various schools. They represent only a handful from a vast literature, but they are available and give a fair view of the competing systems.

Patrick Fairbairn, *The Interpretation of Prophecy* (1865)

David Brown, *Christ's Coming, Will It Be Pre-millennial?* (1876)

George N. H. Peters, *The Theocratic Kingdom* (3 vols., 1884)

Herman Ridderbos, *The coming of the Kingdom* (1962)

J. Barton Payne, *Encyclopedia of Biblical Prophecy* (1973)

Paul Lee Tan, *The Interpretation of Prophecy* (1974)

George E. Ladd, *The Presence of the Future* (1975; a revision of *Jesus and the Kingdom*, 1964)

Robert G. Clouse, ed., *The Meaning of the Millennium: Four Views* (1977)

Typology

[See Milton S. Terry, *Biblical Hermeneutics*, esp. pp. 334-95; Patrick Fairbairn, *The Typology of Scripture* (reprinted; 2 vol. in one); S. Lewis Johnson, Jr., *The Old Testament in the New*; Leonhard Goppelt, *Types* (1939; E.T. 1982); W. Edward Glenny, "Typology: A Summary of the Present Evangelical Discussion," *JETS* 40:4 (Dec., 1997) 627-38.]

A type is a person or event that God has ordained to be a pointer to another, usually greater, person or event (called the "antitype"). Examples from Scripture:

- Adam → Christ (representative head of his people)

- Events in Israel's coming from Egypt → events in Jesus' life
- David → Christ (both sufferings and kingship)
- Antiochus Epiphanes → the future Antichrist

[More discussion in notes, ch. 6.]

Numerology

[See Terry, 380-90; esp. John J. Davis, *Biblical Numerology* (1968; excellent treatment of the subject)]

Two extremes to avoid

Some take all numbers to be significant of symbolic meaning, as did the ancient gematria. In this way, for example, they give meanings to the 153 fish taken by the disciples in John 21 (this is a "triangular number," $1 + 2 + 3 + \dots + 17$).

Others deny all symbolism in numbers, even though in many texts the author seems to go out of his way to invoke certain numbers (esp. in John and Revelation).

Symbolic numbers

Numbers most commonly considered to be symbolic are the following (see the chart in Davis, pp. 122-23):

3 (?)

4

6 (?)

7

10

12

40

70

1000

numbers in the Daniel-Revelation complex (3½, 42, 1260)

Literal numbers

Note that the symbolic use of numbers, even if granted, does not negate their literal use. An example to prove this point would be the length of David's reign, given as forty years; yet this is literal, since the text explains it was the sum of 7 and 33 years (2 Sam 5:5).

“It is thus by collation and comparison of the peculiar uses of these numbers [4, 7, 10, 12] that we can arrive at any safe conclusion as to their symbolical import. But allowing that they have such import as the foregoing examples indicate, we must not suppose that they thereby necessarily lose their literal and proper meaning.” (Terry, 383-84)

Terry goes on to state that he prefers the literal understanding of Daniel's and Revelation's time periods (p. 385).

The number seven

Numbers had symbolic usage in noncanonical writings in OT times; but the only number to be clearly symbolic in the Bible is 7. See John J. Davis, pp. 103-24, where the other numbers are discussed.

Parables

Some important books on parables

Richard Chenevix Trench, *Notes on the Miracles and the Parables of Our Lord* and *Notes on the Parables of Our Lord* (ca. 1860; the first book named has more footnotes)

A. B. Bruce, *The Parabolic Teaching of Christ* (1889)

W. O. E. Oesterley, *The Gospel Parables in the Light of Their Jewish Background* (1936)

C. H. Dodd, *The Parables of the Kingdom* (1938)

Joachim Jeremias, *The Parables of Jesus* (1954)

Parables as figures of speech

Parables, as extended similes, are designed to convey in a vivid manner a particular truth. They should be treated as any other figure of speech. A parable's meaning is single, not multiple; and it normally can be determined by its context.

Purpose of parables

It appears that the parables of Jesus were given for two different reasons:

- To make a teaching vivid and plain (Luke 15—the lost sheep, the lost coin, the lost son)
- To make a teaching obscure (Mark 4:11-12—the sower)

Sometimes it is hard for us to determine if a given parable was hard or easy for Jesus' audience to interpret. NT critics such as Albert Schweitzer have exploited this fact to raise questions about the integrity of the NT history. However, we must remember that we have the benefit of centuries of Christian knowledge; to the original hearers the meaning of many of Jesus' parables may well have eluded them.

Two major types of parables

Simple parables are designed to teach one central idea (Matt 18—the unmerciful servant, Luke 10—the Good Samaritan, Luke 15—the lost son). The primary danger with such parables is the tendency to make each detail teach some spiritual or eschatological truth, to make the parable “stand on all fours.”

Complex parables are designed to illustrate a complex of ideas, with many points of intended comparison (Matt 13—the sower, Matt 21—the tenants, Matt 22—the wedding banquet). Such parables can be identified by the context, which would interpret the various details, or by the parable itself, which closely and obviously parallels a historical situation.

Supernatural events

As noted earlier, the Christian believes in the possibility and reality of “supernatural” events in history. These include acts of direct divine intervention in our space-time universe, such as the creation itself, the universal flood, the miracles recorded in the OT, and those recorded in the NT as being performed by Jesus and his disciples, and the predicted eschatological events.

While the interpreter does not go out of his way to find miracles in the Bible, he does not seek to rationalize either, or to dissolve them into myth. It is generally granted that the biblical world considered miracles as possible, and would have understood the biblical text as asserting their reality. We believe the modern Christian should receive the biblical revelation with the same “naïve” approach.

We note also that the biblical miracles are not sensationalistic. In each case there is a clear purpose, either in a practical need, or in an intended teaching. Jesus did not perform miracles gratuitously (Matt 4:3-4; 16:1-4). We also note that the miracles are not absurd or grotesque, as the old saying goes, “The whale swallowed Jonah; Jonah didn’t swallow the whale!” We also see that there were long periods even in biblical history when God did not act through miracles, but through ordinary providence.

One can see the cessation of miracles at the closing of the apostolic period, both in the later NT books and in the early Christian fathers. Miracles are not to be expected until the eschaton.