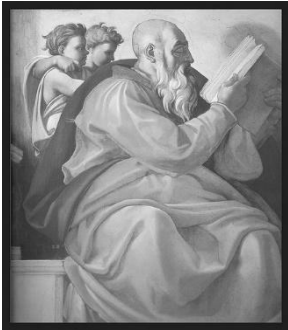




Zechariah: A Pattern for Prophetic Interpretation

By Dr. David Schnittger



There is no biblical subject fraught with more controversy than that of interpreting prophecy. Some Bible interpreters teach that the prophetic passages in the book of Zechariah cannot be

interpreted literally. Amillennialists are one such group. Amillennialists (otherwise known as “realized millennialists”) believe that the Bible does not predict a literal rule of Christ on earth before the last judgment. Walter Elwell describes the amillennial viewpoint as follows:

According to this outlook there will be a continuous development of good and evil in the world until the second coming of Christ, then the dead shall be raised and the judgment conducted. Amillennialists believe that the kingdom of God is now present in the world as the victorious Christ rules his church through the Word and the Spirit. They feel that the future, glorious, and perfect kingdom refers to the new earth and life in heaven. Thus Revelation 20 is a description of the souls of dead believers reigning with Christ in heaven.¹

To give you an example of how this affects one’s interpretation of Zechariah, Marten Woudstra, an amillennial author, interprets Zechariah 14 this way: “From the mixed character of the imagery employed, referring now to cataclysmic upheavals, now to regular pilgrimages to Jerusalem, it seems to this writer that no such literal interpretation of the passages is intended. The prophecy has in view

various aspects of the gospel age with particular emphasis on its conclusion.²

In other words, to the amillennialist, the prophecies of Zechariah should be interpreted “allegorically” or “spiritually” rather than literally. The prophecies in Zechariah, according to the amillennial school of interpretation, refer to the Church Age, not to a literal future and earthly millennial kingdom. I like the honesty of a famous amillennialist, Martin Luther, as he tried to interpret Zechariah 14. Luther said, “Here in this chapter, I give up. For I am not sure what the prophet is talking about.”³ If we take a non-literal approach to Zechariah, can we hope to be more successful in understanding it than Martin Luther, who had a Ph.D. in theology and was the “Father of the Protestant Reformation”?

Another non-literal interpretation of the book of Zechariah is the preterist (past) view. That is the interpretation of the prophetic portions of Zechariah that asserts that Zechariah is a symbolic assortment of prophecies describing the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70, together with the spread of the gospel throughout the Church Age thereafter. In other words, prophecies concerning the second coming of Christ have been fulfilled in the past.⁴

There are some who would argue that “special methods of interpretation” apply to Bible prophecy. Bernard Ramm, in his classic work, *Protestant Biblical Interpretation*, notes three such methods. This first

² M. Woudstra, *The Biblical Expositor*, Vol. 2 (Philadelphia: A.J. Holman Co., 1960), 377-378.

³ M. Luther, “Lectures on Zechariah. The German Text, 1527” in *Luther’s Works*, Vol. 20: *Lectures on the Minor Prophets III: Zechariah* (ed. Hilton c. Oswald; Saint Louis: Concordia, 1973), 337.

⁴ G.N. M. Collins, *The New Bible Commentary*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1954), 761-763.

¹ W. Elwell, *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*. (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1984), 715.

method is known as the “spiritual” interpretation. Ordinarily this term refers to a man’s piety and devotion, “. . . But with reference to prophecy it means that a given prediction is not to be fulfilled in a literal way but in a different way, in a different key. The descriptions of the great prosperity of Israel is ‘spiritualized’ into meaning the great successes of the Christian church.”⁵

A second term, used synonymously with “spiritualizing” is the term “allegorizing.” “Allegorizing was a very prominent method of interpretation in the early Christian Church. It was an inflated typology. In a simply way allegory means one story on top of another. This usually meant that the literal or historical sense of the passage was ‘fleshly’ but the allegorical content was ‘spiritual.’”⁶

A third term that is occasionally used in the interpretation of prophecy is the word “mystical.” “In this sense the word *mystical* has the idea of a hidden meaning. The lamb of Exodus 12 whose blood was put on the lintels of the door has at its mystical or hidden meaning the Lamb of God of John’s Gospel. The German word *pneumatische* (*pneumatic*, ‘mystical,’ ‘spiritual’) is used at times to indicate the kind of interpretation that goes beyond the literal and historical meaning of a passage. In this sense *pneumatische* and *mystical* are synonyms.”⁷

Most dispensationalists and premillennialists would object to the employment of a special hermeneutic for interpreting Bible prophecy. The thesis for this article is that as we look at the *fulfilled* prophecies of Zechariah that were *literally fulfilled* in the first coming of Christ, this gives us the indication that the inspired prophet expected the *literal fulfillment* of that which is yet to come. We will consider examples of both fulfilled and unfulfilled Messianic prophecies from the book of Zechariah to support that position.

EXAMPLES FROM THE FIRST ADVENT

Let’s begin by considering the prophecy concerning the triumphal entry in Zechariah 9:9: “Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion; shout, O daughter of Jerusalem;

behold thy King cometh unto thee; he is just, and having salvation; lowly, and riding upon an ass, and upon a colt, the foal of an ass.”

The fulfillment of that prophecy is found in both Matthew 21:1-5 and John 12:14-15. The Matthew 21 passage reads as follows: “And when they drew nigh unto Jerusalem, and were come to Bethphage, unto the mount of Olives, then sent Jesus two disciples, Saying unto them, Go into the village over against you, and straightway ye shall find an ass tied, and a colt with her: loose them, and bring them unto me. And if any man say ought unto you, ye shall say, The Lord hath need of them; and straightway he will send them. All this was done, that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the prophet, saying, Tell ye the daughter of Sion, Behold, thy King cometh unto thee, meek, and sitting upon an ass, and a colt the foal of an ass.”

What was the length of time between the issuing of the decree to rebuild Jerusalem and the triumphal entry - between the 14th of March, B.C. 445, and the 6th of April, A.D. 32? The interval contained exactly, to the very day, 173,880 days, or seven times 69 prophetic years (483 years) as per Gabriel’s prophecy found in Daniel 9:25. This is a striking example of the exacting literalness of biblical prophecy.⁸

The next prophecy that occurs in the life of Christ is His betrayal, as recorded in Zechariah 11:12, 13: “And I said unto them, if ye think good, give me my price; and if not, forbear. So they weighed for my price thirty pieces of silver. And the Lord said unto me, Cast it unto the potter—a lordly price that I was prized at of them. And I took the thirty pieces of silver, and cast them to the potter in the house of the Lord.”

The speaker in this passage is Christ Himself, and He is asking for the Jew’s evaluation of His labors and His worth. Their appraisal amounted to the price of an ox-gored slave. We read of that in Exodus 21:32: “If the ox shall push a manservant or a maidservant; he shall give unto their master thirty shekels of silver, and the ox shall be stoned.” The betrayal of Jesus, the Son of God, for thirty pieces of silver, is one of the most ludicrous transactions reported in the Bible. Far worse than outright rejection, the Jewish readers placed the Lord Jesus Christ on the value level of an

⁵ Bernard Ramm, *Protestant Biblical Interpretation*, (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1970), 241.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 242.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 242, 243.

⁸ Robert Anderson, *The Coming Prince* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 19th edition, 1975), 128.

injured slave. The remarkable accuracy and detail of this prophecy is shown not only by the disclosure of the exact amount of “blood money” given, but also by the fact that it would be thrown down in the house of the Lord by the conscience-stricken Judas, and that the money would be used to purchase the potter’s field to bury Judas. We read of the fulfillment of this amazing prophecy in Matthew 26:14-16; 27:3-8:

“Then one of the twelve, called Judas Iscariot, went unto the chief priests, And said unto them, ‘What will ye give me, and I will deliver him unto you?’ And they covenanted with him for thirty pieces of silver. And from that time he sought opportunity to betray him . . . Then Judas, which had betrayed him, when he saw that he was condemned, repented himself, and brought again the thirty pieces of silver to the chief priest and elders, Saying, ‘I have sinned in that I have betrayed the innocent blood.’ And they said, ‘What is that to us? See thou to that.’ And he cast down the pieces of silver in the temple, and departed, and went and hanged himself. And the chief priests took the silver pieces, and said, ‘It is not lawful for to put them into the treasury, because it is the price of blood.’ And they took counsel, and bought with them the potter’s field, to bury strangers in. Wherefore that field was called, The field of blood, unto this day.”

We see in just these two examples of first advent prophecies in Zechariah that they were fulfilled in exacting and literal detail. Does this provide a *pattern* for interpreting unfulfilled prophecy?

EXAMPLES FROM THE SECOND ADVENT

Let’s begin this examination of second advent prophecies by considering predictions regarding the dispersion of Israel and their regathering in the last days. Deuteronomy 28-32 deals with the “blessings” and “cursings” that would come to Israel based on their obedience or disobedience. One of the promised curses to disobedient Israel has to do with prophecies regarding their dispersion. Deuteronomy 28:63-66 states:

“And it shall come to pass that as the LORD rejoiced over you to do you good, and to multiply you; so the LORD will rejoice over you to destroy you, and to bring you to nought; and ye shall be plucked from off the land whither thou goest to possess it. And the

LORD shall scatter thee among all people from the one end of the Earth even unto the other; and there thou shalt serve other gods, which neither thou nor thy fathers have known, *even* wood and stone. And among these nations shalt thou find no ease, neither shall the sole of thy foot have rest: but the Lord shall give thee there a trembling heart, and failing of eyes, and sorrow of mind: And thy life shall hang in doubt before thee; and thou shalt fear day and night, and shall have none assurance of thy life:

Since their dispersion in AD 70, the Bible predicted that the people of Israel would be subject to severe persecution in many nations. This prophecy has been literally fulfilled again and again even into modern times during the Nazi holocaust. According to this prophecy, there is apparently more persecution yet to come in the last days, even until the end of the Tribulation. We read in Zechariah 14:2: “And I will gather all nations against Jerusalem to battle: and the city shall be taken, and the houses rifled, and the women ravished: and half of the city shall go forth into captivity, and the residue of the people shall not be cut off from the city.” This prophecy will find fulfillment just before the second coming of the Messiah.

Not only does the Bible predict that Israel will be regathered to her ancient homeland in the “latter days,” but it also predicts the *order* of this regathering, in both the Old and New Testaments. In Isaiah 43 the prophet seeks to bring comfort to Israel by predicting her regathering, in a particular order, in the latter days. Consider Isaiah 43:3-6:

“For I am the LORD thy God, the Holy One of Israel, thy Saviour: I gave Egypt for thy ransom, Ethiopia, and Seba for thee, Since thou wast precious in my sight, thou hast been honourable, and I have loved thee: therefore will I give men for thee, and people for thy life. Fear not, for I am with thee, I will bring thy seed from the east, and gather thee from the west; I will say to the north, Give up: and to the south, Keep not back: bring my sons from far, and my daughters from the end of the earth.”

The promised regathering, including the specific order of these events, is repeated in the New Testament. We read the words of Jesus in Luke 13:29: “And they (Israel) shall come from the east, and from the west, and from the north, and from the south, and shall sit down in the kingdom of God.” Let’s consider how this

prophetic order has been fulfilled exactly as promised in these latter days of the church age.

East (Middle East): I believe the regathering from the “east” refers to the Middle East. Beginning around 1900, Jews from Turkey, Jordan, Syria, Iraq, Yemen and other Middle Eastern nations began migrating to what was then known as Palestine. Almost 90% of Jews from these countries have migrated to Israel as of the present, and the migration continues.

West (Europe): In 1939, the Jewish population of Europe was 9,408,000. In 1948, it had dropped to 3,708,000. After the Nazi holocaust, in which almost six million Jews were killed, additional hundreds of thousands fled to Israel seeking a place of peace and safety. Because of rising anti-Semitism in Europe, we are seeing, once again, an acceleration of Jews returning to Israel from Europe.

North (Russia): Beginning in 1988, under the *glasnost* (openness) policies of Gorbachev, Jews were allowed to immigrate back to Israel. To date, over four hundred thousand Russian Jews have gone to Israel.

South (Ethiopia): In 1991, under *Operation Solomon*, approximately 14,000 black Ethiopian Jews (known as Falasha) were flown to Israel, in a period of 72 hours. These Jews, according to tradition, are descendants of the child born to Solomon and the Queen of Sheba.

Because of this miraculous regathering, in fulfillment of ancient prophecies, there are now ethnic Jews that have returned to Israel from every nation in the world. The latest population figures indicate a current population in Israel of 7.4 million - 6 million Jews and approximately 1.4 million Arabs. God is regathering the Jews *now* with a view toward redeeming a remnant of them *later*.

The first prophecy in Zechariah that will be fulfilled at Christ’s second coming is in regards to His arrival upon the Mount of Olives. We read about this in Zechariah 14:4: ‘And his feet shall stand in that day upon the Mount of Olives, which is before Jerusalem on the east, and the Mount of Olives shall cleave in the midst thereof toward the east and toward the west, and there shall be a very great valley; and half of the mountains shall remove toward the north and half of it toward the south.’

This incredible prophecy is actually very credible, according to the modern science of seismography. For example, an article entitled, “Zechariah and the Rift Valley,” states:

“The Great Rift Valley is a unique topographical feature along which the ground has sunk between parallel faults. It extends north and south along the Jordan Valley, the Red Sea, and through Africa to the Zambesi River, in the southeast . . . Such tremendous topographical changes would be the result of a great earthquake along a unique fault line scarred with signs of earth movements. This fault line is regarded by seismologists as a region of great potential earthquake danger. The River Jordan runs north and south through a portion of this great fault in the earth’s crusts. This fault begins in the Toros Mountains in Turkey, continues down the Jordan Valley, through the Gulf of Aqaba, across the Red Sea, and ends somewhere in southeast Africa.”⁹

CONCLUSION

As we look at the *fulfilled* prophecies of Zechariah that were *literally fulfilled* in the first coming of Christ, this gives us the indication that the inspired prophet expected the *literal fulfillment* of that which is yet to come. We can have great confidence that what God has predicted will surely and literally come to pass in real time and real space and real soon!

In light of the clarity and specificity of fulfilled prophecy and the certainty that unfulfilled prophecy will likewise come to fruition in a literal fashion in every detail, we would be wise to heed Peter’s admonition in 2 Peter 1:19: “We have also a more sure word of prophecy; whereunto ye do well that ye take heed, as unto a light that shineth in a dark place, until the day dawn, and the day star arise in your hearts.”

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⁹ *Zechariah and the Rift Valley* (Christian Assemblies International: cal.org/biblestudies/zechariah), 1.

