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The Symbolism of Prophecy

What every Bible teacher
should know before
they begin to teach

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Additional material

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The Symbolism of **Prophecy**, with special reference to the Predictions of the Parousia.

The slightest attention to the language of Old Testament prophecy must convince any sober minded man that it is not to be understood according to the letter. First of all, **the utterances of the prophets are poetry**; and, secondly, they are Oriental poetry.

They may be called hieroglyphic pictures representing historical events in highly metaphorical imagery.

It is inevitable, therefore, that **hyperbole**,¹ or that which to us appears such, should enter largely into the descriptions of the prophets.

To **the cold prosaic imagination of the West**, the glowing and vivid style of the prophets of the East may seem flowery and extravagant; but there is always a sub-stratum of reality underlying the figures and symbols, which, the more they are studied, commend themselves to the judgment of the reader.

Social and political revolutions, moral and spiritual changes, are shadowed forth by **physical convulsions and catastrophes**; and if these natural phenomena affect the imagination more powerfully still, they are not inappropriate figures when the real importance of the events which they represent is apprehended.

The earth convulsed with **earthquakes, burning mountains** cast into the sea, the **stars falling** like leaves, **the heavens** on fire, **the sun clothed in sackcloth**, the **moon turned into blood**, are images of **appalling grandeur**, but they are not necessarily unsuitable representations of great civil commotions, the overturning of thrones and dynasties, the desolations of war, the abolition of ancient systems, and great moral and spiritual revolutions.

In prophecy, as in poetry, the material is regarded as the spiritual, the passions and emotions of humanity find expression in corresponding signs and symptoms in the inanimate creation.

Does the prophet come with glad tidings ? He calls upon **the mountains** and **the hills** to break forth into song, and **the trees** of the forest to clap their hands. Is his message one of lamentation and woe ? **The heavens** are draped in mourning, and **the sun** is darkened in it's going down. No one, however anxious to keep by the bare letter of the word, would think of insisting that such metaphors should be literally interpreted, or must have **a literal fulfilment**.

1. Hyperbole: exaggerated statements or claims not meant to be taken literally.

The utmost that we are entitled to require is, that there should be such historical events specified as may worthily correspond with such phenomena; great moral and social movements capable of producing such emotions as these physical phenomena seem to imply.

It may be useful to select some of **the most remarkable of these prophetic symbols** as found in the Old Testament, that we may note the occasions on which they were employed, and discover the sense in which they are to be understood,

In Isaiah 13. we have a very remarkable prediction of **the destruction of ancient Babylon**. It is conceived in the highest style of poetry. The Lord of hosts musters the host of the battle; the tumultuous rush of the nations is heard; the day of the Lord is proclaimed to be at hand; **the stars of heaven** and **the constellations** withhold their light; **the sun is darkened** in his going forth, **the moon ceases to shine; the heavens are shaken,** and **the earth removed out its place**. All this imagery, it will be observed, which **if literally fulfilled** would involve the wreck of the whole material creation, is employed to set forth **the destruction of Babylon by the Medes**. Isa 13.17, Jer 51.11, 28

Again, in Isaiah 24.18-20 we have a prediction of judgments about to come upon the land of Israel; and among other representations of the woes which are impending we find the following:

'The windows from on high are open; the foundations of the earth do shake. The earth is utterly broken down; the earth is completely dissolved; the earth shall reel to and fro like a drunkard, and shall be removed like a cottage; it shall fall, and not rise again,'

All this is symbolical of the civil and social convulsion about to take place in the land of Israel. In Isaiah 34.3-4,8-10 the prophet denounces judgments on the enemies of Israel, particularly on **Edom**, or **Idumea**.

The imagery which he employed of the most sublime and awful description:

'The mountains shall be melted with the blood of the slain. All the host of heaven shall be dissolved; the heavens shall be rolled together as a scroll, and all their host shall fall down, as the leaf falls off from the vine, and as a falling fig from the fig-tree.'** **'The streams thereof shall be turned into pitch, and the dust thereof into brimstone, and the land thereof shall become burning pitch. It shall not be quenched night nor day; the smoke thereof shall go up for ever; from generation to generation it shall be waste; none shall pass through it for ever and ever'

It is not necessary to ask. Have these predictions been fulfilled ? We know they have been; and the accomplishment of them stands in history as a perpetual monument of the truth of Revelation. **Babylon, Edom, Tyre**, the oppressors or enemies of the people of God, have been made to drink the cup of the Lord's indignation.

The Lord has let none of the words of His servants the prophets fall to the ground. But no one will pretend to say that the symbols and figures which depicted their overthrow were literally verified.

These emblems are **the drapery of the picture**, and are used simply to heighten the effect and to give vividness and grandeur to the scene.

In like manner **the prophet Ezekiel** uses imagery of a very similar kind in predicting the calamities which were coming upon Egypt: (Ezek. 32.7,8).

'And when I shall put them out, I will cover the heaven, and make the stars thereof dark. I will cover the sun with a cloud, and the moon shall not give her light. All the bright lights of heaven will I make dark over them, and set darkness upon the land, says the Lord God'

Similarly the prophets **Micah, Nahum, Joel, and Habakkuk** describe the presence and interposition of the Most High in the affairs of nations as accompanied by stupendous natural phenomena: (Micah 1.3,4).

'Behold, the Lord comes forth out of his place, and will come down, and tread upon the high places of the earth, and the mountains shall be molten under him, and the valleys shall be cleft as wax before the fire, and as the waters that are poured down a steep place'

'The Lord has his way in the whirlwind and in the storm, and the clouds are the dust of his feet. He rebukes the sea, and makes it dry, and dries up all the rivers. The mountains quake at him, and the hills melt, and the earth is burned at his presence: yes the world, and all that dwell therein. His fury is poured out like fire, and the rocks are thrown down by him' (Nahum 1.3-6).

These examples may suffice to show, what indeed is **self evident**, that in prophetic language the most sublime and **terrible natural phenomena** are employed to represent **national and social convulsions** and revolutions. Imagery, which if literally verified would involve the total dissolution of the fabric of the globe and the destruction of the material universe, really may mean no more than the downfall of a dynasty, the capture of a city, or the overthrow of a nation.

The following are the views expressed by **Sir Isaac Newton** on this subject, which are substantially just, though perhaps carried somewhat too far in supposing an equivalent in fact for every figure employed in the prophecy:

'The figurative language of the prophets is taken from the analogy between the natural world and an empire or kingdom considered as nation states. Accordingly, the world natural, consisting of heaven and earth, signifies the whole world of nations, consisting of thrones and people, or so much of it as is considered in prophecy; and the things in that world signify the analogous things in this.

For the heavens and the things therein signify thrones and dignities, and those who enjoy them: and the earth, with the things thereon, the inferior people; and the lowest parts of the earth, called Hades, the lowest or most miserable part of them. Great earthquakes, and the shaking of heaven and earth, are put for the shaking of kingdoms, so as to distract and overthrow them; the creating of a new heaven and earth, and the passing of an old one; or the beginning and end of a world, for the rise and ruin of nation states signified thereby.

The sun, for the whole species and race of kings, in the kingdoms of the world; the moon, for the body of the common people considered as the king's wife; the stars, for subordinate princes and great men; or for bishops and rulers of the people of God, when the sun is Christ.

Setting of the sun, moon, and stars; darkening the sun, turning the moon into blood, and falling of the stars, for the ceasing of a kingdom.'

We will only quote in addition the excellent remarks of a judicious expositor

Dr. John Brown of Edinburgh:

'Heaven and earth passing away,' understood literally, is the dissolution of the present system of the universe; and the period when that is to take place is called 'the end of the world.'

But a person at all familiar with the phraseology of the Old Testament scriptures knows that the dissolution of the Mosaic economy and the establishment of the Christian, is often spoken of as the removing of the old earth and heavens, and the creation of a new earth and new heavens.

For example,

'Behold, I create new heavens and a new earth, and the former shall not be remembered, nor come into mind.' 'For as the new heavens and the new earth, which I will make, shall remain before me, says the Lord, so shall your seed and your name remain' (Isa. 65.17; 66.22).

The period of the close of the one dispensation and the commencement of the other is spoken of as **'the last days,'** and **'the end of the world,'** and is described as such a **shaking of the earth and heavens** as should lead to the removal of the things which were shaken. (Hag 2.6; Heb 14.26,27.)

It appears, then, that if Scripture be the best interpreter of Scripture, we have in **the Old Testament** a key to the interpretation of the prophecies in the New. The same symbolism is found in both, and the imagery of **Isaiah, Ezekiel,** and the other prophets helps us to understand the imagery of **St. Matthew, St. Peter, and St. John.**

As the dissolution of the material world is not necessary to the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy, neither is it necessary to the accomplishment of the predictions of the New Testament.

But though symbols are metaphorical expressions, they are not unmeaning. It is **not necessary to allegorise them,** and find a corresponding equivalent for every symbol; it is sufficient to regard the imagery as employed to heighten the sublimity of the prediction and to clothe it with impressiveness and grandeur.

There are, at the same time, a true meaning and an underlying reality in the symbols of prophecy. The moral and spiritual facts which they represent, the social and ecumenical changes which they typify, could not be adequately set forth by language less majestic and sublime.

There is reason for believing that an inadequate apprehension of the real grandeur and significance of such events as **the destruction of Jerusalem** and **the abrogation of the Jewish economy** lies at the root of that system of interpretation which maintains that nothing answering to the symbols of **New Testament** prophecy has ever taken place.

Hence the uncritical **and unscriptural figments of double senses, and double, triple, and multiple fulfillments of prophecy.**

That physical disturbances in nature and extraordinary phenomena in the heavens and in the earth may have accompanied the expiring throes of the Jewish dispensation we are not prepared to deny. It seems to us highly probable that such things were.

But the literal fulfillment of the symbols is not essential to the verification of the prophecy, which is abundantly proved to be true by the recorded facts of history.

Matt 24.33 [R.V.] *“...Instantly there are all the signs which usher in the Day of the Lord. The darkened sun, the lurid moon, the showers of meteors, the shrivelled heavens, the terror with which men call on the rocks and mountains to fall on them and hide them, are the metaphors of vast earthly changes and catastrophes.*

*A first sight it might well seem as if they could describe **nothing short of the final conflagration and ruin of the globe.** But there is not one of these metaphors which is not found in the Old Testament prophets and in them they refer in every instance to **the destruction of cities** and the establishment of **new covenants**, or to **other earthly revolutions.***

*Not only had our Lord adopted these **vivid Oriental symbols** to describe the sign of His coming in **the fall of Jerusalem and the close of the aeon...**”*

*“Early days of Christianity ” by **F W Farrar** page 447/8*

A Judgment against Babylon

(This is pure hyperbole)

Isa 13.1-22 *The noise of a multitude in the mountains, as of a great people! the noise of a tumult of the kingdoms of the nations gathered together! Jehovah of hosts is mustering **the host for the battle.** They come from a far country, from **the uttermost part of heaven**, even Jehovah, and the weapons of his indignation, to destroy the whole land.*

Wail ye; for the day of Jehovah is at hand; as destruction from the Almighty shall it come.

Therefore shall all hands be feeble, and every heart of man shall melt: and they shall be dismayed; pangs and sorrows shall take hold of them ; they shall be in pain as a woman in travail: they shall look in amazement one at another; their faces' shall be faces of flame.

Behold, the day of Jehovah cometh, cruel, with wrath and fierce anger; to make the land a desolation, and to destroy the sinners thereof out of it.

For the stars of heaven and the constellations thereof shall not give their light; the sun shall be darkened in its going forth, and the moon shall not cause its light to shine.

And I will punish the world for their evil, and the wicked for their iniquity: and I will cause the arrogance of the proud to cease, and will lay low the haughtiness of the terrible.

I will make a man more rare than fine gold, even a man than the pure gold of Ophir.

Therefore I will make the heavens to tremble, and the earth shall be shaken out of its place, in the wrath of Jehovah of hosts, and in the day of his fierce anger...

Behold, I will stir up the Medes against them, who shall not regard silver, and as for gold, they shall not delight in it. And Babylon, the glory of kingdoms, the beauty of the Chaldeans pride, shall be as when God overthrew Sodom and Gomorrah.

It shall never be inhabited, neither shall it be dwelt in from generation to generation: neither shall the Arabian pitch tent there; neither shall shepherds make their flocks to lie down there.

Isa 2.12,19; Isa 34.3,4; 50.3; Jer 4.23; Ezek 32,7,8; Joel 2.10; Hos 10.8; Nah 1.6; Mal 3.2

The extant to which **the Apostle** borrows the phrases of **the Old Testament** may be seen by taking Rev 1.12-17, and comparing it phrase by phrase with

Zech 4.2; Dan 7.13; 10.5; 7.9; 10.6,11,12; Isa 49.2; Ezek 43.2



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