

Overview

BIBLICAL STYLES: REVELATION IS A PROPHETIC BOOK.

Although future events may be involved in a prophecy, its main purpose is *not* to predict the future. Prophecy is a style or category of literature with a particular purpose (I'll get to that purpose below). It differs from historical and poetic literature, and it has distinct rules of interpretation. These rules follow what might be called the Levitical or priestly tradition. What this means is that prophetic literature contains words and phrases that have a specific and recognized meaning. A prophetic year, for example, is 360 days. The prophetic calendar is based on lunar movement rather than solar. Numbers are sometimes symbolic; they could be used in a non-mathematical sense. The number 1000, when used prophetically, indicates infinity, or a really long time. Here's where it gets complicated: prophetic books may contain historical and poetic passages; historical and poetic books may contain prophetic ones. Along the way, we may encounter symbols, figures, types, metaphors, and allegories. Parts of the Revelation are historic; others are poetic, figurative, and predictive.

Poetic Scripture

Poetic passages are idealistic. They tend to take things to an extreme in an attempt to give us a sense of an experience that may be physically impossible. They are suggestive, not explicit. They are intensely imaginative. Just when you think you have a grasp of what they describe, the image slips through your fingers like a vapor. They attempt to express a truth that is inexpressible. It is the only language available to us to describe the love, justice, grace, sovereignty, wisdom, and eternal nature of God. We can know something about these things, but we cannot know everything. We are finite. He is infinite.

The Proper Use of Parables

Then there are *parables*, which have their own set of rules. If we use the wrong set of rules to interpret a particular passage, or if we misperceive which style or category a passage belongs to, then the outcome can become nonsensical or even outlandish. Because prophecy differs from parable, parables should not be used as a means to interpret prophetic passages. Therefore, although the parables of the talents and the minas include the return of a master, they cannot help to determine the meaning of passages in Revelation, nor do they describe the physical return of Christ. They have a different purpose. Let me explain why this is true by showing you how these various styles and tools are used (types, figures of speech, symbols, and metaphors).

Types in Scripture

Many of the settings and figures in prophecy are *typical*. That means they foretell of something or someone coming in the future that will be similar to what is described, but not exactly. What is described is only a *type*, a kind of what is to come. Joseph was a type for the Christ who was to come. He was a type in the sense that he was the Provider for the tribes of Israel (his brothers). He saved them from certain destruction, just as Christ did. Yet Joseph was not completely Christ-like. He was not sinless, because he didn't need to be. He was not going to be a holy offering. Christ, by comparison, had to be sinless, or his sacrifice would be ineffectual. Joseph was a type and so he was only similar, not an exact representation. Following this train of thought, Christ is *not* just a type for the Father. He is an exact representation. From a literary point of view, his

function is metaphorical, but that would fall far short of the truth. And so we describe him as the Incarnation of God. He is God made flesh.

Figurative Language

Very close to *typical* language is *figurative* language. It can be an embellishment in the style of poetry. So, for example, in Ps. 91:4 it says, "He shall cover you with his feathers, and under his wings you will trust..." This is a figure of speech. God is not a large chicken. It is not metaphorical, because I don't gain any insights about God by studying a chicken, or an eagle. The only intent in this passage is to suggest the image of a mother hen protecting her chicks. But God is not the potential prey of a wolf as a mother hen might be. If it had gone on to say that the hen would sacrifice herself for her chicks, then it would turn into a metaphor: it would perhaps tell us something about the nature of Christ's sacrifice. But it doesn't. Figurative language tends to convey an emotion rather than a fact.

Symbol and Metaphor

A symbol is not a type. A *symbol* always follows in time what it represents, because it serves as a *reminder* of what already is. A *type* always precedes what it represents in time, because it is a *premonition* of what is yet to be. A symbol is meant to represent something in particular. That's also true of a metaphor or an allegory. What makes a metaphor useful, and what distinguishes it from a symbol, is that the closer you examine the metaphor, the more you understand what the metaphor represents. In other words, one thing not only stands for another (as a symbol does), it helps to *explain* the other. A cross is a symbol of Christ's sacrifice, but by examining the wood or the shape, we learn nothing more about his sacrifice. What we know about his sacrifice is external to the symbol itself; the symbol is just a shorthand for that knowledge.

Compare this to a butterfly, which could be a metaphor for the new life we have in Christ: it is a new creation with a new appearance. Its very nature reveals something about ourselves. An **allegory** would take the butterfly metaphor and expand on it. It might describe the journey from caterpillar to butterfly, or how a butterfly feeds. As we learn more about the life of a butterfly, we learn more about our life in Christ. We could say that a caterpillar can destroy the very plant it feeds upon, while a butterfly actually benefits the flower it feeds from by cross-pollinating it. What we learn about ourselves from this allegory is that, as non-Christians, much of our behavior was at the expense of others; it was destructive to those around us. But now that we are in Christ, we benefit those around us. We bring the message of life to them, and we may be blessed to reproduce in them the life we have in Christ.

Parables as Moral Tales

Now, returning to parables, a parable explains a moral or religious truth. That's all we're after when we interpret it. We are asking, "What is the *primary* truth here?" Thus, in a parable many things about the setting and characters help us to *understand* it, but not everything is needed to *interpret* it. Part of the fun is figuring out which things are essential, and which are only window dressing. The setting and characters in a parable don't necessarily represent someone or someplace in particular. Even when they do, their description is seldom completely accurate. So in the parable of the minas (Lk. 19:12 ff), it would be incorrect to think that Christ is hated, or that he is a hard task master; but it would be correct to think that he has expectations of us.

Prophecy

Prophecy, however, is different. Its purpose is not the same as a metaphor or an allegory. It does not explain the nature of something by alluding to something akin to it. Instead, it lifts its audience out of their present circumstances and places them into the stream of eternity. It gives them an eternal perspective on their present circumstances. *Prophecy uses setting and characters to prepare and encourage the target audience for what is to come. This is an essential rule of prophetic interpretation.*

THE PURPOSE OF THE BOOK OF REVELATION

The Book of Revelation is a handbook of spiritual battle. It was intended to prepare its readers for that battle by describing the nature of the battle and its ultimate outcome. It was designed to instill faith and courage in its readers in the face of seemingly insurmountable odds, by emphasizing over and over that the battle is fought in the heavenly realms by Christ Himself. He is already the conqueror king, and we are merely the occupying army of his domain.

There are many interpretations of the Book of Revelation. We will be using one favored in Reformed circles that may help you understand the text without substituting past, current, or future events and personalities for the events and characters of John's Revelation. It identifies seven parallel sections in the Book of Revelation that repeat the same theme in each section, but with increasing detail in each re-telling. This interpretation is favored by L. Berkhof, S.L. Morris, B.B. Warfield and others. Not everyone agrees as to where each section begins and ends, however.

Although you are not bound to the interpretation presented here, as a student of Scripture you should certainly be familiar with it. Do not discount it out of hand, no matter what other interpretations you may already be familiar with or comfortable with. There is a great deal of needless confusion, intentional misrepresentation, and heated debate surrounding the End Times and the Book of Revelation. Feel free to bring any viewpoint into the fray as we sort out the book of Revelation in the light of the whole of God's Holy Word. But do not hold so dearly to a particular point of view that you lose the insight provided by other students and scholars.

What you believe about the future is a reflection of what you believe about the past. If a battle of Armageddon is yet to be fought, then Christ failed to defeat Satan on the cross, and our current role is far different than it would have been. We would be a conquering army instead of an occupying force. Someone else's territory would have to be taken, instead of taking possession of what is already ours. The land of Canaan was promised to God's people. He went ahead of them to conquer it. Their mission was to take possession of the Promised Land. It was *theirs* for the taking. Only three things were required: obedience, trust, and courage. That is the only sense in which we should be looking at our present spiritual battles. We are not told to conquer, but to stand firm.¹ Advancing the kingdom is done by staking out our individual territory and defending it. We then grow our occupying force by setting free the prisoners of our enemy. These new creatures will in turn stake out their own territory. Our enemy is the already-defeated usurper of Christ's throne. We need to act like we believe it.

¹ OT - Ex 14:13; 2Ch 20:17; Isa 46:8; Da 11:32; NT - 1Co 16:13; 2Co 1:24; Ga 5:1; Eph 6:13; Php 4:1; 2Th 2:15; 1Pe 5:12;