How to interpret Bible prophecy

© Evert van Voorthuizen, January 2021.
Email: preteristadvocate@gmail.com.

Preterism interprets some prophecies (but not the time statements) in a less literal and more consistently biblical fashion. Consider the following:

1. Apocalyptic (cosmic or "de-creation") language in the Olivet Discourse and in Revelation derives from the Old Testament (OT) prophets and should be interpreted accordingly:
   The extinguishing of the sun, moon and stars is figurative language for the demise of a nation and its rulers. One notable example is Ezekiel's pronouncement of judgment (in 32:7-8) on Pharaoh and his realm.[1] Therefore, when we encounter similar language in the New Testament (in Matthew 24:29, Acts 2:20, and Revelation 6:12-14; 8:12), we must interpret that language as exaggerated and figurative as well.
   And likewise with the description, in 2 Peter 3, of the fiery destruction of the earth and its "elements".[2]
2. Elijah's "second coming" was missed because of overly literalistic expectations:
   The prophecies of Malachi 4:5-6 were fulfilled in the ministry of John the Baptist — in the way John turned many Israelites back to God (Lk 1:16-17; Mt 11:14; 17:10-13; cf. 1Kgs 18:37).
3. God's deliverance of his people from Egyptian bondage foreshadowed the redemptive work of Jesus.
   Later Old Testament prophecies foretelling the deliverance of God's people from foreign oppression and exile similarly anticipated the much greater deliverance that Jesus has accomplished, namely, our rescue from the guilt and power of sin, from Satan, and from death. For these are our real enemies.
   In Isaiah, for example, the birth of Immanuel was God's sign that he was with his people and would deliver them from foreign oppression (Isa 7:14-16; 8:9-10).[3] But Jesus — the ultimate Immanuel — came to "save his people from their sins" (Mt 1:21-23).[4]
   Likewise for the restoration prophecies of Isaiah 40 – 66:
   Cyrus would deliver God's people from Babylon, and rebuild their city and temple (Isa 44:28; 45:13).
   But it would fall to Yahweh's Servant to accomplish the definitive deliverance by dealing with the root cause of exile — the people's sin (Isaiah 53).
   The exile of God's people in Assyria and Babylon epitomized the universal exile and banishment of all mankind in Adam. The Servant's restorative work would therefore include Gentiles (Isa 42:6-7; 49:6; 56:6-8). Through Jesus' work all mankind is restored to God's presence in "Jerusalem".
   John's final vision, that of the New Jerusalem (Revelation 21 – 22), depicts the city's definitive restoration through Jesus, with God's people gathered from exile into his presence.[5]

---

[1] Similar language is also to be found in Isaiah 13:10 (depicting judgment on Babylon); Isaiah 34:4 (on the nations); Jeremiah 4:23-26 (on Judah and Jerusalem); Joel 2:10, 31; 3:15 (on Israel and the nations).

[2] Note further, in this regard, the prophecies of Haggai: Yahweh's "shaking" of the heavens and the earth (Hag 2:6) relates not to the demise of planet Earth, but to the overthrowing of the world's geopolitical order (Hag 2:21-22).

[3] As a sign to King Ahaz, there may have been some initial, provisional fulfillment of the Immanuel promise in his day.

[4] Jesus further came to destroy Satan and abolish death (Heb 2:14-15; 1Cor 15:25-26; 2Tim 1:10). That his deliverance was to be of a spiritual nature (rather than political) may be seen from his dialogue with the Jews in John 8:31-36.

[5] "Jerusalem" is now both in heaven and on earth (Rev 21:2, 10). In 70 AD the saints in Paradise were gathered, via resurrection, into the heavenly city (Heb 11:10, 16, 35, 39-40; Rev 20:11-15; 21:7). And on earth, believers under the New Covenant enjoy the privilege of "living" in Jerusalem (Heb 12:22) — indeed, in the very presence of God himself (Mt 27:51; Heb 10:19-20; Rev 21:3).
The heavenly city represents the final, posthumous destiny of every Christian (Heb 13:14).

That OT restoration prophecies are definitively fulfilled through Christ may be seen from the following:

- First-century Jews regarded themselves as being, to all intents, still in exile and under God's judgment.
  But through Jesus all that was about to change:
  As God's promised Davidic King, Jesus would soon deliver Israel from all her enemies (Lk 1:68-75).
  He would bring the long awaited "consolation of Israel" and accomplish the "redemption of Jerusalem" that Yahweh had promised to effect through his Servant (Lk 2:25, 38; cf. Isa 40:1-2; 52:9; Lk 24:21).
- Jesus related his own work to that of the Servant (Lk 4:18-19; cf. Isa 61:1-2).
- Paul related many of Isaiah's prophecies to the first-century proclamation of the gospel:
  Acts 13:47; Romans 9:27-29, 33; 10:11, 15-16, 20-21; 15:12, 21; 2 Corinthians 6:1-2; Galatians 4:26-27.

4. What about prophecies concerning Messiah's rule over the Gentiles (e.g., Psalms 2, 72, 110; Isaiah 11)?
   Should we view him as returning to establish his millennial rule from a literal throne in Jerusalem?
   That is certainly the view of Jewish Zionists and Christian premillennialists.
   Similar views by first-century Jews led them to crucify Jesus; he failed to fulfill their carnal expectations.
   But no, it was in Jesus' resurrection and ascension that David's throne was restored (Lk 1:32-33; Ac 2:30-36).
   He rules from the heavenly Zion (Ps 2:6; 110:1-2).
   He "conquers" the nations through the gospel (Mt 28:18-20; Gal 3:8; cf. Isa 2:3-4; 42:4).
   Indeed, we are to view David's rule over surrounding peoples as anticipating the gospel conquests of his greater Son. See Acts 15:16-17 (which cites Amos 9:11-12) and Romans 15:9 (which cites Psalm 18:49).[6]
5. What about prophecies concerning the lasting peace that Messiah will establish?
   For example, those of Isaiah 11:6-9: the wolf living with the lamb, etc., on God's holy mountain.
   Isn't this a prophecy of Messiah's millennial rule? Or of his reign in the new creation?
   Isn't Isaiah harking back to the (pre-Curse) situation in Eden, with no dangerous predators?
   In answer, we should note that lions and wolves have always been carnivorous,[7] so Isaiah's language must be understood figuratively.
   Two points:
   First, the lasting peace to be enjoyed in the messianic age is a prominent theme in Isaiah:
   International relations will be transformed (2:1-4); foreign oppression will cease (9:1-7); former enemies (Egyptians, Assyrians, Israelites) will be reconciled as they worship God together (19:23-25); nothing will threaten God's people gathered to Jerusalem (Isa 35:9-10; 65:19-25).
   So also, Isaiah 11:6-9 pictures perfect harmony between natural enemies — predators and prey.
   Second, Isaiah 11:10 (LXX) is cited in Romans 15:12 to support Paul's assertion that Gentile salvation had been God's intention all along (Rom 15:9-12). In context, Paul is urging Christians to accept one another despite their differences — to show love and forbearance; to have a spirit of unity (Rom 15:1-7).
   Isaiah 11 is a prophecy about Messiah's reign and kingdom (cf. 11:1-5), and 11:10 anticipates the Gentiles rallying to, and seeking out, this king.
   Paul viewed these prophecies as being fulfilled in his day via the gospel, as the "knowledge of the LORD" (Isa 11:9) spread throughout the world. Diverse groups were becoming united under the lordship of Christ.
   In church life, the natural hostility between Jews and Gentiles was being eroded as they worshipped God together (Rom 15:5-13; Eph 2:14-15).

[6] David's victories over surrounding nations are related in 2 Samuel 8.
Note the context of Psalm 18:49, which Paul cites: 18:43-50 has obvious prophetic/messianic significance.
[7] Wolves and lions are designed (and were created) to be carnivorous. The fossil record shows that predation has always been a feature of the natural world. Predation controls populations and ensures ecological balance and the maximization of biodiversity.