

Crossroads of Prophecy

PRINCIPLES OF PROPHETIC INTERPRETATION-1

by Desmond Ford

Four definite facts are known about Bible prophecy:

- 1) Prophecy grows out of the sacred story*
- 2) Prophecy makes sense to those who first heard it*
- 3) Prophecy can have repeated applications*
- 4) Prophecy is always Christ-centered, gospel-centered, and church-centered.*

I

t was about 1944 when I first read Uriah Smith's *Thoughts on Daniel and Revelation*. I thought it was a very good title.

Why did Smith call it *Thoughts on Daniel and Revelation*? Because it is mainly a symposium of materials he gathered from many of his forerunners in the historicist school of prophetic interpretation, people such as Bishop Newton and Josiah Litch.

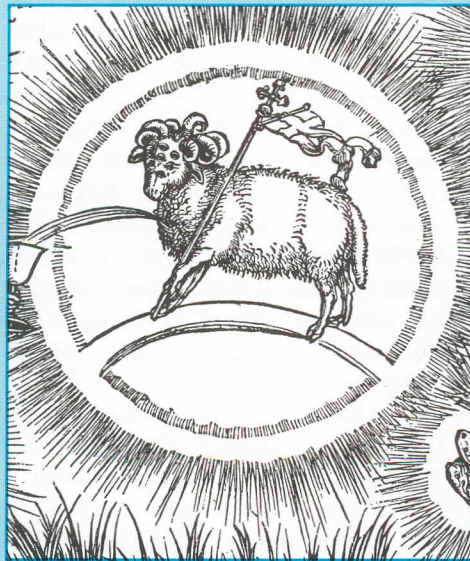
I found Smith's book fascinating. But when I got to Daniel 11, I suddenly found myself in a morass of irrelevant details about Turkey without significance to me. The King of the North coming to his end was the one section of the book I skipped. I moved on to Smith's thoughts on Revelation. To my wondrous gaze it was full of phenomenal things I had never dreamt of.

Great Changes in Fifty Years

In the half century which has followed my first contact with Uriah Smith there have been great changes in the matter of the interpretation of prophecy. The changes are so great that for the most part they cannot be published.

There have been hints of these changes here and there. The *SDA Bible Commentary* says that there are

various and differing views held on the meaning of the seven trumpets beginning in Revelation 8:6 (SDABC 7:788, 1957). The commentary does not take the time or space to elaborate on all the views. Even lesson quarterlies have had the grace to say that there is more to know on some of these prophetic topics.



Four Basic Principles of Prophecy

Let me suggest four principles of prophetic interpretation, and illustrate them:

First, prophecy usually grows out of the sacred story. Second, proph-

ecy makes sense to those who first hear it. Third, prophecy may have repeated applications. Fourth, prophecy is typically Christ-centered, gospel-centered, and church-centered.

Prophecy is not a crystal ball. It is related to the time and events of the prophet. It is also quite impossible to understand prophecy without its historical context and setting.

Principles in First Prophecy

Let me illustrate with Genesis 3:15 (NIV):

And I will put enmity
between you and the
woman,
and between your offspring
and hers;
he will crush your head,
and you will strike his heel.

Prior to this, the serpent had led the woman and the man into rebellion against God. The floodgates of woe have opened upon the human race. Adam and Eve stand naked and ashamed. God, the great Judge, has come down and they are trembling.

God gives them a bright star in their darkness. God turns to the serpent, who is the instigator of this evil, and says, "These people you have led astray, they have no

strength nor power against you. But I will put enmity between them and you. Even though you led them into transgression, I am not going to give them up to you. I will empower them to resist you. I will put enmity between your followers and my followers.”

Eve becomes the symbol of the church, of the old and new covenants.

The prophecy goes on to say that one particular offspring of Eve’s will crush Satan’s head, while Satan will only be able to bruise that offspring’s heel. Satan is going to be destroyed and crushed by One who will come from the loins of the woman Satan has deceived.

Fulfillment Begins

In Genesis 4 we read of the birth of Cain. Eve says of her son, “I have begotten a man, Jehovah” (Gen 4:1). She thought the promise would be fulfilled in her first child.

It is like that with us. We hear the promises of God, and we pray expecting an immediate answer, and immediate fulfillment. Eve mistakenly thought she had the Man already; but the prophecy had only **begun** to be fulfilled. The serpent made war on the seed of the woman through Cain slaying his brother Abel. The prophecy **continued** to be fulfilled as the seed of the serpent fell into pagan and false worship and the offspring of the woman remained true and faithful to Yahweh.

Fulfillment in the Cross

The conflict **continues** through the Old Testament until it reaches its climax at the cross. Here is the true Man, Jesus. He comes from the woman in virgin birth. Judas, Caiaphas, and Pilate take the seed of the woman, and bruise his heel.

As the serpent bruises his heel, Jesus crushes the serpent’s head. In the hands of God, the cross becomes an inverted sword that pierces the head of the serpent, Satan. At the same time, our bill of indebtedness is settled.

Just as David used Goliath’s sword to cut off Goliath’s head, so Christ takes the cross (which Satan used to bruise Christ’s heel) and crushes the serpent’s head.

Conflict Through the Ages

Paul considers this same theme: “The God of peace will soon crush Satan under your feet” (Rom 16:10).

Here is the same imagery, this time with Satan being crushed by God under **our** feet. The promise about the enmity between the seed of the serpent and the offspring of the woman has its continuous fulfillment in the conflict between good and evil through the centuries.

We can see from the promise of Romans 16:20 that the crushing of Satan took place at the cross. Romans 16:20 was written after the cross, yet uses the language of Genesis 3:15. That prophecy had its fulfillment at the cross; but it has its consummation at the second coming (and the third, after the millennium).

The Theme in Revelation 13

In the book of Revelation we read, “One of the heads of the beast seemed to have had a fatal wound, but the fatal wound had been healed. The whole world was astonished and followed the beast” (Rev 13:3).

When I first read Uriah Smith, he explained what this meant. In 1798 the pope was taken prisoner; thus, the papal beast received a deadly wound. Later editors of Smith’s book added that in 1929 the wound was healed in the Lateran Treaty between Mussolini and the Vatican. This was accepted as the fulfillment of Revelation 13:3 by Adventists throughout the 1930s. But these events—the pope taken prisoner by General Berthier, and the signing of the Lateran Treaty—have nothing to do with the text of Revelation 13:3. The verse is using, yet again, the language of Genesis 3:15.

In Revelation, the author, John, introduces the dragon, the beast, and the false prophet. It is a false trinity.

As the Father sends the Son, so the dragon sends the beast. As the Son has a representative, the Holy Spirit, so the beast has a representative, the false prophet.

The beast with the seven heads and the ten horns is the serpent’s representative, and is pictured as being wounded to death. When we think of the word ‘wounded’ we think of a gash; but the Greek word means **slain**, or

killed to death, and going down into the abyss of death. All this alludes to the cross.

The Theme in Revelation 12

In the previous chapter, chapter 12, Michael fights the serpent, casting him to the ground (12:7-9). Michael treads on the serpent’s head, and bruises him unto death.

We realize this is God’s **legal** reckoning with the devil. We know from the personal experience of being tempted, that the devil is still alive. As any serpent that has its head crushed, the body still moves and twitches. Since the time of the cross, the devil has refused to stay dead. He comes from the bottomless pit to persecute the people of God. Nevertheless, it is the imagery of Genesis 3:15 that is repeated in Revelation 12.

“Then the dragon was enraged at the woman and went off to make war against the rest of her offspring—those who obey God’s commandments and hold to the testimony of Jesus” (Rev 12:17). Here is the same theme as in Genesis 3:15—the conflict between the devil and the church, which is the body of Christ, which is the seed of the woman.

Summary

1. Prophecy comes out of the sacred story.
2. It makes sense to those who first hear it (though not necessarily in all its details).
3. Prophecy may have repeated applications, though not repeated senses. It must always have the same sense, but on a larger and more ascendant scale.
4. Prophecy is always Christ-centered, gospel-centered, and church-centered.

We took the one prophecy of Genesis 3:15, and saw how it grew out of the sacred story. It is not like a meteor out of the darkness. It grew out of the story and out of the historical facts.

In Eden, the serpent and Eve were in primeval conflict over obedience and disobedience. Out of that story came the first prophecy.

That prophecy made sense to Eve and Adam, even though they did not understand all of its meaning. Adam

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and Eve saw its first fulfillment in the experience of Cain and Abel.

The prophecy also taught something of what was to happen to Eve's descendants, the followers of Yahweh, and the followers of the devil. It foreshadowed the final conflict to come. There would be a continuing conflict between good and evil through the ages, leading to a major fulfillment at the cross. According to Romans 16, the final consummation is at the second advent, when Satan is finally crushed under God's feet.

The imagery from Genesis is repeatedly used in Revelation. The prophecy is unfolded as being Christ-centered, gospel-centered, and church-centered. ❖