

The  
8 GREAT  
DEBATES  
*of* BIBLE  
PROPHECY

RON RHODES



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## THE 8 GREAT DEBATES OF BIBLE PROPHECY

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*In loving memory of Tom, Alpha, and Paul—  
“Away from the body and at home with the Lord”*

2 CORINTHIANS 5:8

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# Debating Bible Prophecy

Bible prophecy enthusiasts come in many varieties. Regarding the millennial kingdom, there are premillennialists, amillennialists, and postmillennialists. On the issue of the rapture, there are pretribulationists, midtribulationists, and posttribulationists. Other Christians hold to the partial-rapture theory, and still others hold to the pre-wrath view. Some Christians are dispensationalists while others are in the covenant theology camp. Even within the dispensational camp, we have traditional dispensationalists, revised dispensationalists, and progressive dispensationalists. Likewise, within the covenant theology camp are those who subscribe to the classical covenant view and those who subscribe to the modified covenant view. No wonder many Christians are more than a little confused about some of the finer points of Bible prophecy.

We Christians have our own unique terminology (appropriately called *Christianeze*), and we love to debate and sometimes argue about our various prophetic views. Honesty compels us to admit that in many cases we tend to generate more heat than light when discussing our prophetic differences.

I wrote this book to help Christians understand the biblical backdrop to these various views on prophecy. A book like this provides a number of benefits.

- After reading it, you will no doubt better understand why you believe what you believe about Bible prophecy. You will strengthen your personal convictions about Bible prophecy.
- You will likely come to appreciate the fact that those who hold to a different position than you do still believe the Bible, just as you do. They just interpret it differently.
- On each of the eight great debates of Bible prophecy, I'll tell you what my personal position is and why. If you end up agreeing with me, great. If you end up disagreeing with me, that's okay too. My only exhortation is that you prioritize "rightly handling the word of truth" (2 Timothy 2:15). After all, our commitment is to the Bible, not to a man-made system of theology.
- Through the process, I hope we will all learn to agree to disagree in an agreeable way on issues where we differ. Perhaps we will become skilled at generating more light than heat!

## **In Nonessentials, Liberty**

I believe that Bible prophecy is an important component in the broader field of biblical studies. Of the 23,210 verses in the Old Testament, 6,641 are prophetic. (That's about 28.5 percent.) And of the 7,914 verses in the New Testament, 1,711 are prophetic. (About 21.5 percent.) Merging the Old and New Testaments together, 8,352 of its 31,124 verses are prophetic. That means prophecy makes up 27 percent of the Bible—more than one-fourth. That alone should motivate us to study prophecy and form some conclusions, always treating each other in a Christlike way when we disagree.

I love the way my late colleague Walter Martin handled this. He hired me in the 1990s to work at the Christian Research Institute. He interviewed me for more than an hour. We talked about areas of agreement (of which there were many) as well as areas of disagreement. The timing of the rapture was one of those areas of disagreement.

Once the interview was over, Walter came around from the desk



and gave me a big bear hug (he was famous for doing that). He hired me despite the fact that he was a posttrib and I was a pretrib. We treated each other in a Christ-honoring way despite minor differences in our prophetic views. Of course, we agreed on all the big issues—the nature of God, the deity of Christ, the gospel of salvation, and the like. So in the scheme of things, our difference on the timing of the rapture was a relatively minor issue.

Both Walter and I had long been proponents of the venerable dictum “In essentials, unity; in nonessentials, liberty; in all things, charity.” This is a great dictum to keep in mind as we explore the various Christian views of Bible prophecy.

## How This Book Is Organized

This book deals with eight great debates in Bible prophecy. Each part of this book focuses on one debate and contains a few concise chapters that describe the various views Christians have held on that issue.

You will notice that there are 27 chapters divided among the eight primary debate topics. This means that some of the debates involve discussions on a number of subtopics. As you might expect, a book with 27 chapters must necessarily be selective regarding the content of each chapter. Brevity is the rule. Because of space constraints, I paint in broad strokes so you can see the big picture of each issue without getting buried in unnecessary details. My prayerful goal is for this book to be concise and user friendly, brimming with helpful information while avoiding tedious theological details that are more appropriate for the seminary classroom.

So if you're ready, strap on your seatbelt, and let's begin our prophetic journey. We have a lot to explore.

*Father, we pray that You would enlighten the eyes of our understanding as we study the important issue of Bible prophecy. Help us to gain clarity on the various views, and enable us to anchor ourselves in what we believe to be the correct position. Teach us to rightly handle the word of truth.*

*We ask also that You would help us to respond to those who hold to different views in Christ-honoring ways. Help us to understand that we can personally come to rock-solid conclusions on issues related to Bible prophecy while flavoring our words with grace and charity toward those who disagree. Through it all, Lord, help us to have humble and teachable spirits. In Jesus's name, amen.*



## DEBATE 1

# Should Prophecy Be Interpreted Literally or Allegorically?

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### IN THIS SECTION

1. The Hermeneutics of Bible Prophecy:  
Literal or Allegorical?
2. Covenant Theology Versus  
Dispensationalism



## The Hermeneutics of Bible Prophecy: Literal or Allegorical?

Should prophetic verses be interpreted allegorically or literally? This is a foundational question. Obviously one's response will affect one's entire eschatology, so this is the place to consider this question.

### Viewpoint 1: Prophecy Should Be Interpreted Allegorically

Early in the history of the Christian church (around AD 190), an allegorical school of prophetic interpretation arose in Alexandria, Egypt. In this school, Scripture was consistently interpreted in a non-literal sense. Hidden, symbolic meanings were sought. The emergence of this allegorical school of interpretation led to the rise of amillennialism in the early church. According to this view, the prophecy in Revelation 20 regarding the millennial kingdom should not be interpreted as a literal 1000-year reign of Christ on earth. Rather, it refers to Christ's present spiritual rule over the church from heaven.

The grammatical-historical (literal) approach to Scripture was largely regained by the Church Fathers in the second and third centuries. Nevertheless, premillennialism, which is based on a literal interpretation of prophecy and holds to a literal 1000-year reign of Christ

on earth, eventually fell by the wayside. North Africa, in particular, emerged as a hotbed of Alexandrian allegorization.<sup>1</sup>

This early emergence of the allegorical method had enormous influence on subsequent generations. The great theologian Augustine adopted the point of view that Scripture, with the exception of prophecy, should be interpreted naturally and literally. Even regarding prophecy, however, Augustine was inconsistent. He accepted a literal second coming of Christ as well as a literal heaven and hell, but he concluded that prophecies of a future millennial kingdom would not be literally fulfilled. He believed that to take these passages literally, one would have to conclude that people in the millennial kingdom would regularly engage in excessive feasting, which he viewed as carnal and unworthy of believers. He concluded that the church was already living in the millennium as part of the spiritual kingdom of God. Indeed, he believed that Christ is even now reigning in the hearts of Christians.

Augustine's view became the dominant view of the Roman Catholic Church. Reformation luminaries, such as Martin Luther and John Calvin, also adopted his view. Because such well-known theologians in church history interpreted millennial prophecies allegorically, many today have adopted the same view. In fact, some today apply the allegorical method not only to the millennium but also to other aspects of biblical prophecy.

Whether one interprets prophecy allegorically or literally will determine how one answers many questions related to biblical prophecy.

- Will the millennial kingdom be a literal 1000-year reign of Jesus Christ on earth, or does this refer to the present spiritual reign of Christ from heaven?
- Will the covenant promises made to Israel in Old Testament times (the Abrahamic and Davidic covenants) be literally fulfilled in Israel, or will they be spiritually and allegorically fulfilled in the church?
- Are the various judgments referred to in prophetic Scripture (such as the judgment seat of Christ for Christians, the

judgment of the nations following Christ's return, and the great white throne judgment for unbelievers following the millennium) separate and distinct judgments (as a literal interpretation would indicate), or do these various terms describe one general judgment at the end of the age (as per an allegorical interpretation)?

- Are the various resurrections in prophetic Scripture (the rapture, the first resurrection, the second resurrection, and the like) distinct resurrections (the literal view), or do these various terms refer to one general resurrection at the end of the age (the allegorical view)?

Amillennialists, who use the allegorical method, concede that if one interprets Bible prophecy literally, one will indeed end up believing in distinct judgments, distinct resurrections, a fulfillment of the Abrahamic and Davidic covenants for Israel, and a literal 1000-year reign of Christ on earth. For example, amillennialist Floyd Hamilton affirms that “we must frankly admit that a literal interpretation of the Old Testament prophecies gives us just such a picture of an earthly reign of the Messiah as the premillennialist pictures.”<sup>2</sup>

Obviously one's choice of an interpretive method is of enormous importance. One should therefore weigh this debate very carefully. I will present the case for a literal interpretation of prophecy, which I believe to be the correct view.

## **Viewpoint 2: Prophecy Should Be Interpreted Literally**

The word *literal* as used in hermeneutics (the science of interpretation) comes from the Latin *sensus literalis*, which refers to seeking a literal sense of the text as opposed to a nonliteral or allegorical sense of it. It refers to the understanding of a text that any person of normal intelligence would get without using any special keys or codes.

Another way to describe the literal approach to Scripture is that it embraces the normal, everyday, common understanding of words. Words are given the meaning they normally have in common

communication. It is the basic normal or plain way of interpreting a passage.

Having said this, I want to briefly address three key qualifications.

*The literal method does not eliminate figures of speech.* When the Bible speaks of the eye, arms, or wings of God (Psalm 34:15; Isaiah 51:9; Psalm 91:4), these should not be taken literally. God does not really have these physical features—He is pure spirit (John 4:24). Likewise, He cannot literally be a rock (Psalm 42:9), which is material. But we would not know what is *not* literally true of God unless we first know what *is* literally true.

For example, if it were not literally true that God is pure spirit and infinite, we would not be able to say that certain things attributed to God elsewhere in the Bible are not literally true—such as materiality and finitude. When Jesus said “I am the true vine” (John 15:1), the literal method of interpretation does not take this as physically true. Rather, we understand this as a figure of speech, telling us that believers derive their spiritual life from Christ, our spiritual vine. Understanding this is important because prophetic apocalyptic literature—such as the books of Daniel and Revelation—make heavy use of figures of speech.

Determining when a passage should and should not be taken literally may sometimes be difficult. But certain guidelines help us make this determination. Briefly, a text should be taken figuratively when...

- it is obviously figurative, as when Jesus said He is the door (John 10:9);
- the text itself authorizes the figurative sense, as when Paul said he was interpreting Scripture allegorically (Galatians 4:24); or
- when a literal interpretation would contradict other truths inside or outside the Bible, such as when the Bible speaks of the “four corners of the earth” (Revelation 7:1).

Bible expositor David Cooper suggests that we ought to “take every word at its primary, ordinary, usual, literal meaning, unless the facts of



the immediate context, studied in the light of related passages and axiomatic and fundamental truths, indicate clearly otherwise.”<sup>3</sup>

*The literal method does not eliminate the use of symbols.* The Bible is filled with symbols. But each symbol is emblematic of something literal. For example, the book of Revelation contains many symbols that represent literal things. John said the seven stars in Christ’s right hand were “the angels of [messengers to] the seven churches,” and the seven lampstands were the seven churches (Revelation 1:20). He saw the prayers of the saints as bowls full of incense (5:8), and the “peoples and multitudes and nations and languages” appeared as waters (17:15). Clearly then, each symbol represents something literal. Textual clues often point us to the literal truth found in a symbol—either in the immediate context or in the broader context of the whole of Scripture.

*The literal method does not eliminate the use of parables.* Jesus often used parables that are not to be taken literally. Yet parables always convey a literal point. Jesus wanted His parables to be clear to those who were receptive—He carefully interpreted the parables of the sower (Matthew 13:3-9) and the tares (verses 24-30) for the disciples. He did this not only so their correct meaning would be clear but also to teach believers how to properly interpret the other parables. Christ did not interpret His subsequent parables because He fully expected believers to follow the method He demonstrated and understand the parables’ literal truths.

## Six Good Reasons to Take a Literal Approach

I can think of at least six good reasons for adopting a literal interpretation of Scripture, including biblical prophecy.

1. A literal interpretation is the normal approach in all languages.
2. The greater part of the Bible makes good sense when taken literally.
3. A literal approach allows for allegorical or symbolic meanings when indicated in the context, as is often the case

in such apocalyptic literature as the books of Daniel and Revelation.

4. As noted previously, all allegorical or symbolic meanings actually depend on the literal meaning. In other words, we would not know what is *not* literally true unless we first know what *is* literally true.
5. The literal method is the only sane and safe check on our subjective imaginations.
6. The literal method is the only approach that is consistently in line with the nature of inspiration—the idea that the very words of Scripture are God-breathed. By contrast, “The system of spiritualizing Scripture is a tacit denial of the doctrine of the verbal, plenary inspiration of the Scriptures.”<sup>4</sup>

## A Literal Approach Is Confirmed in the Biblical Text

The biblical text provides a number of confirmations of the literal hermeneutic. For example, later biblical texts interpret earlier ones literally, as when the creation events in Genesis 1–2 are taken literally by later books (see Exodus 20:10–11). This is likewise the case regarding the creation of Adam and Eve (Matthew 19:6; 1 Timothy 2:13), the fall of Adam and his resulting death (Romans 5:12–14), Noah’s flood (Matthew 24:38), and the accounts of Jonah (Matthew 12:40–42), Moses (1 Corinthians 10:2–4, 11), and numerous other historical figures.

Further, more than a hundred predictions about the Messiah were literally fulfilled in Jesus’s first coming, including that He would be...

from the seed of a woman (Genesis 3:15)  
 from the line of Seth (Genesis 4:25)  
 a descendent of Shem (Genesis 9:26)  
 the offspring of Abraham (Genesis 12:3)  
 from the tribe of Judah (Genesis 49:10)  
 the Son of David (Jeremiah 23:5–6)  
 conceived of a virgin (Isaiah 7:14)

born in Bethlehem (Micah 5:2)  
heralded as the Messiah (Isaiah 40:3)  
the coming King (Zechariah 9:9)  
the sacrificial offering for our sins (Isaiah 53)  
pierced in His side at the cross (Zechariah 12:10)  
killed about AD 33 (Daniel 9:24-25)  
resurrected from the dead (Psalm 16:11)

Theologian Charles C. Ryrie is spot-on in his assessment:

In the interpretation of unfulfilled prophecy, fulfilled prophecy forms the pattern... The logical way to discover how God will fulfill prophecy in the future is to discover how He fulfilled it in the past. If the hundreds of prophecies concerning Christ's first coming were fulfilled literally, how can anyone reject the literal fulfillment of the numerous prophecies concerning His second coming and reign on the earth?<sup>5</sup>

We may therefore expect that the prophecies of the end times will be fulfilled just as literally as the prophecies of the first coming of Christ. Theologian Charles Feinberg summarizes the point this way:

Take the words of Gabriel in the first chapter of Luke where he foretells of the birth of Christ. According to the angel's words Mary literally conceived in her womb; literally brought forth a son; His name was literally called Jesus; He was literally great; and He was literally called the Son of the Highest. Will it not be as literally fulfilled that God will yet give to Christ the throne of His father David, that He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and that of His glorious kingdom there shall be no end?<sup>6</sup>

I want to briefly make a few other observations before closing. First, by specifically indicating in the text the presence of parables (see Matthew 13:3) or an allegory (Galatians 4:24), the Bible thereby indicates that the ordinary meaning is a literal one. And by interpreting a parable,

Jesus revealed that parables have a literal meaning behind them (Matthew 13:18-23).

Second, notice that by rebuking those who did not interpret the resurrection literally, Jesus indicated that the literal interpretation of the Old Testament was the correct one (Matthew 22:29-32). We might say that Jesus's use of Scripture constitutes one of the most convincing evidences that Scripture ought to be interpreted literally.

Clearly then, our best approach in understanding God's prophetic revelation is to use a literal approach. This is the only approach that yields the intended meaning of the biblical author, which is the only true meaning.

## Conclusion

Those who hold to an allegorical method of Bible interpretation come up with different meanings of a passage of Scripture. They end up disagreeing not only with premillennialists (who take a literal approach) but also with each other. Of course, this is what one would expect of an allegorical method. We cannot expect objective consistency among those who use a subjective methodology.