

May 2009

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Recommended Citation

Ice, Thomas D., "The Literal Fulfillment of Bible Prophecy" (2009). *Article Archives*. Paper 101.
http://digitalcommons.liberty.edu/pretrib_arch/101

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THE LITERAL FULFILLMENT OF BIBLE PROPHECY

Tom's Perspectives

by Thomas Ice

I have always thought that one of the most powerful arguments for the literal fulfillment of prophecy relating to Christ's future coming is the fact that prophecy was fulfilled literally at His first coming. I still very much believe this in spite of the fact that some have attempted to dispute this important truth. Those who argue that prophecy will not be fulfilled literally in the future go against God's past pattern and have no biblical basis for their claims.

SYMBOLS AND FIGURES OF SPEECH

Some opponents of the future, literal fulfillment of prophecy attempt to argue against future, literal fulfillment by noting that prophecy often employs symbols and figures of speech. This is true, but does not mean that prophecy is not fulfilled literally in history. Literal interpreters have always taken into account symbols and figures of speech. Dr. Charles Ryrie explains:

Symbols, figures of speech and types are all interpreted plainly in this method and they are in no way contrary to literal interpretation. After all, the very existence of any meaning for a figure of speech depends on the reality of the literal meaning of the terms involved. Figures often make the meaning plainer, but it is the literal, normal, or plain meaning that they convey to the reader.¹

Early in Christ's ministry, John the Baptist said of Jesus as He approached him: "Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world" (John 1:29). John used a symbol to designate Jesus—the Lamb of God. Yet, just because a symbol was used does not mean that Jesus did not literally die, as a sacrificial lamb, for man's sin. We all know that he did. John's use of a symbolic reference to Christ complimented the point that Jesus came to "take away the sin of the world" through His actual, sacrificial death. This prediction was fulfilled literally in history.

In a similar way, the Bible uses the term "beast" throughout Daniel and Revelation as a symbol for the person that is often known as the antichrist. Apparently the symbol of the beast was chosen by God to designate the beastly or animal nature of the antichrist. This does not mean that the beast is just the personification of evil in the world. No, even though a symbol is used to describe this still future human being, it means that the antichrist will display ungodly character as a real historical person. This prophecy will be fulfilled literally, just as was Christ's death, as the Lamb of God.

QUOTATION OF THE OLD TESTAMENT

In the mid-1980s a couple of former Dallas Seminary students, who had abandoned the literal interpretation of prophecy, stepped forward to advance a theory that Old Testament prophecy concerning Christ's first coming was not always fulfilled literally, thus, we should not expect a literal fulfillment of prophecy in the future.² Curtis Crenshaw wrote the chapter that said there are "five kinds of fulfillment of the OT in the NT as applied to Christ."³ Crenshaw says that the five kinds of fulfillment are: "direct, typical, analogical, according to sense,"⁴ and "the eschatological Yahweh fulfillment."⁵ Earlier Crenshaw had noted the following statement from Charles Ryrie:

“The prophecies in the Old Testament concerning the first coming of Christ . . . were all fulfilled literally. There is no non-literal fulfillment of these prophecies in the NT.”⁶ Crenshaw provides a list of 97 Old Testament prophecies about Christ’s first coming (he admits he could have missed some), which he classifies according to the five categories.⁷ He then concludes: “Out of 97 OT prophecies only 34 were directly or literally fulfilled, which is only 35.05 percent! Did not Ryrie say **NONE** were fulfilled in a non-literal manner?”⁸

In his zeal to undermine the literal fulfillment of prophecy, Crenshaw introduces a red herring that he believes disproves Ryrie’s contention. But what has he actually done? Crenshaw has taken the way in which inspired New Testament writers quote Old Testament prophecies and substituted this process for the outcome of fulfillment. Crenshaw’s five ways may or may not explain how New Testament writers quote Old Testament passages, but the quotation of these passages is a whole different matter from fulfillment of the prophecies. By introducing the process of how the New Testament writers quote the Old, as if it were the same as the outcome of the fulfillment of prophecy, he has accomplished a great slight-of-hand for many people. Yet, these are two different issues.

FULFILLMENT OF OLD TESTAMENT PREDICTIONS

Regardless of how an inspired New Testament writer quotes or refers to Old Testament prophecy in the New, the real claim by literal interpreters are that these prophecies were fulfilled literally, as opposed to allegorically. What would a literal fulfillment mean and what would a non-literal fulfillment look like? A literal fulfillment involves something that actually happened in history. Back to the statement of John the Baptist proclaiming Jesus as the Lamb of God, as he points to an actual person—Jesus of Nazareth. Jesus later died on the cross as a sacrifice for our sin. This was a literal fulfillment. A non-literal fulfillment would have been something that did not actually take place in time-space history. It would have been some idea of sacrifice that was not actually realized.

Crenshaw says, “Ironically, a course I took at DTS [Dallas Theological Seminary] entitled ‘The Old Testament in the New Testament’, taught by S. Lewis Johnson, began to open my eyes to the fallacies of the dispensational hermeneutic.”⁹ It is clear that Crenshaw has misunderstood and misapplied the information that he was to have learned in Dr. Johnson’s class, just as the book by he and Gunn is filled with similar distortions concerning dispensationalism even though they both had ample opportunity to accurately learn about the system they now oppose.

It is clear that Crenshaw is misusing the information he gained from the lectures in Dr. Johnson’s class when one examines the table of Scripture passages he has composed in his book.¹⁰ As the table moves from left to right, he starts with the New Testament quote, then the Old Testament passage from which the quotation originates, followed by his classification of fulfillment. The fact that he starts with the New Testament passage from which the Old Testament is quoted shows that this table that he gleaned from Dr. Johnson’s class is emphasizing how the passage if quoted in the New Testament, not its fulfillment. This is further recognized when one observes that Crenshaw’s table includes a number of passage that were not fulfilled at Christ’s first coming. For example, Revelation 1:7a, compared with Daniel 7:13 was not fulfilled at Christ’s first coming.

In the early 1990s I saw Dr. Johnson at a theological meeting and discussed with him Crenshaw’s use of his class material as found in their book. Dr. Johnson said he was

familiar with Crenshaw's presentation and noted that his former student had twisted his teachings and applied them to say something with which he could not agree. He too noted that his class dealt with how the New Testament writers quoted the Old Testament. Dr. Johnson thought that it was improper of Crenshaw to apply it to whether an Old Testament prophecy was fulfilled literally or not. He was disappointed that Crenshaw had made it appear that he (Dr. Johnson) was in agreement with the spin that Crenshaw had placed on his lectures.

If opponents of the literal fulfillment of prophecy want to make a case for non-literal fulfillment of prophecies at Christ's first coming they need to try something other than Crenshaw's misguided attempt. They would need to find examples of prophecies that were non-literally fulfilled in the past. But I do not know of one.

CONCLUSION

I believe it is still a true axiom that since the prophecies about Christ's first coming were fulfilled literally then that means that the prophecies relating to His second coming will also be fulfilled literally. It may be that symbols and figures of speech are used in giving those prophecies, but just as they did not affect the literal fulfillment of them in the past, so it will be that they will be fulfilled literally in the future. Sir Robert Anderson has said it well:

There is not a single prophecy, of which the *fulfilment* is recorded in Scripture, that was not realized with absolute accuracy, and in every detail; and it is wholly unjustifiable to assume that a new system of fulfilment was inaugurated after the sacred canon closed. . . . Literalness of fulfilment may therefore be accepted as an axiom to guide us in the study of prophecy.¹¹

Even though the prophecies of Revelation talk about a beast and a Lamb, it is not just poetic language discussing the struggle between good and evil in general. These symbols speak of real, future individuals (the antichrist and Jesus) who will literally be engaged in space-time historical events. Prophecy about the future will be fulfilled literally, just as has prophecy of the past. In fact, there is not other way for prophecy to be fulfilled and still have it classified as prophecy. Maranatha!

ENDNOTES

¹ Charles C. Ryrie, *Dispensationalism* (Chicago: Moody Press, [1966], 1995), pp. 80-81.

² Curtis I. Crenshaw and Grover E. Gunn, III, *Dispensationalism Today, Yesterday, and Tomorrow* (Memphis: Footstool Publications, 1985).

³ Crenshaw and Gunn, *Dispensationalism*, p. 16.

⁴ Crenshaw and Gunn, *Dispensationalism*, p. 15.

⁵ Crenshaw and Gunn, *Dispensationalism*, p. 16.

⁶ Cited in Crenshaw and Gunn, *Dispensationalism*, p. 13 from Charles C. Ryrie, *Dispensationalism Today* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1969), p. 88.

⁷ Crenshaw and Gunn, *Dispensationalism*, pp. 16-22.

⁸ Crenshaw and Gunn, *Dispensationalism*, p. 22 (emphasis original).

⁹ Crenshaw and Gunn, *Dispensationalism*, p. 13 Even though I was not able to take this course at Dallas Seminary I have listened to tape recordings of the actual class that Crenshaw was in. The class was not about the fulfillment of prophecy, but as the title accurately depicts, a study in how the New Testament quotes from the Old Testament.

¹⁰ Crenshaw and Gunn, *Dispensationalism*, pp. 16-22.

¹¹ Sir Robert Anderson, *The Coming Prince* (10th. Edition; Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 1957), pp. 147–48, (emphasis original).