

Principles of Interpretation

by Sir Robert Anderson

The importance of wisdom, sobriety, and reverence in interpreting prophecy, and the need to approach the subject with a clear and definite understanding, avoiding fanciful and extravagant views.

Scripture: Psalm 22:16, Isaiah 53:8, Joel 2:28, Zechariah 9:9, Matthew 11:14, Acts 1:7, Romans 5:21, 2 Peter 2:9, Revelation 6:12

Topics: "Biblical Prophecy", "Proper Interpretation"

Description

Sir Robert Anderson emphasizes the importance of interpreting prophecies with wisdom, sobriety, and reverence, as Lord Bacon advised, to avoid division and misinterpretation. He warns against setting specific dates for Christ's return, as it is a matter of faith and not for us to know the times. Anderson urges for a calm and thoughtful approach to prophetic study, avoiding extravagant views and focusing on the principles of interpretation gained from Scripture. He highlights the danger of loose and superficial reading of prophecies, especially in relation to the Antichrist and the Papacy.

Transcript

"THIS is a work which I find deficient; but it is to be done with wisdom, sobriety, and reverence, or not at all." Thus wrote Lord Bacon in treating of what he describes as "history of prophecy."

"The nature of such a work," he explains, "ought to be that every prophecy of the Scripture be sorted with the event fulfilling the same, throughout the ages of the world, both for the better confirmation of faith and for the better illumination of the Church touching those parts of prophecies which are yet unfulfilled: allowing, nevertheless, that latitude which is agreeable and familiar unto Divine prophecies; being of the nature of their Author with whom a thousand years are but as one day, and therefore are not fulfilled punctually at once, but have springing and germinant accomplishment throughout many ages, though the height or ruiness of them may refer to some one age."

If the many writers who have since contributed to supply the want Lord Bacon noticed, had given due heed to these wise and weighty words, prophetic study might possibly have escaped the reproach which comes of its followers being divided into hostile camps. With the Christian the fulfillment of prophecy does not belong to the region of opinion, nor even of fact, merely; it is a matter of faith. We have a right, therefore, to expect that it shall be definite and clear. But though the principles and maxims of interpretation gained by the study of that part of prophecy which was accomplished within the era of Holy Writ are by no means to be thrown aside when we pass out into post-apostolic times, surely there is no

presumption against our finding hidden in the history of these eighteen centuries a primary and partial fulfillment even of prophecies which will unquestionably receive a final and complete accomplishment in days to come.

Only let us not forget the "wisdom, sobriety, and reverence" which such an inquiry demands. In our day prophetic students have turned prophets, and with mingled folly and daring have sought to fix the very year of Christ's return to earth, - predictions which possibly our children's children will recall when another century shall have been added to the history of Christendom. If such vagaries brought discredit only on their authors, it were well. But though broached in direct opposition to Scripture, they have brought reproach on Scripture itself, and have given a stimulus to the jaunty skepticism of the day. We might have hoped that whatever else might be forgotten, the last words which the Lord Jesus spoke on earth would not be thus thrust aside:

"It is not for you to know the times or the seasons which the Father hath put in His own power." (Acts 1:7)

But what was denied to inspired apostles in days of pristine faith and power, the prophecy-mongers of these last days have dared to claim; and the result has been that the solemn and blessed hope of the Lord's return has been degraded to the level of the predictions of astrologers, to the confusion and grief of faithful hearts, and the amusement of the world.

Any man who, avoiding extravagant or fanciful views, both of history and of Scripture, points to events in the present or the past as the correlatives of a prophecy, deserves a calm and unprejudiced hearing from thoughtful men. But let him not forget that though the Scriptures he appeals to may thus receive "germinant accomplishment," "the height or fullness of them may refer" to an age still future. What is true of all Scripture is specially true of prophecy. It is ours to assign to it a meaning; but he who really believes it to be Divine, will hesitate to limit its meaning to the measure of his own apprehension of it.

The prophecies of Antichrist afford a signal and most apt illustration of this. Were it not for the prejudice created by extreme statements, prophetic students would probably agree that the great apostasy of Christendom displays in outline many of the main lineaments of the Man of Sin. There is, indeed, in our day a spurious liberality that would teach us to forego the indictment which history affords against the Church of Rome; but while no generous mind will refuse to own the moral worth of those who, in England at least, now guide the counsels of that Church, the real question at issue relates to the character, not of individuals, but of a system.

It is the part, therefore, not of intolerant bigotry, but of true wisdom, to search the records of the past - terrible records, truly - for the means of judging of that system. The inquiry which concerns us is not whether good men are found within the pale of Rome - as though all the moral excellence of earth could avail to cover the annals of her hideous guilt! Our true inquiry is whether she has suffered any real change in these enlightened days. Is the Church of Rome reformed? With what vehemence the answer would be shrieked from every altar within her pale! And if not, let but dark days come again, and some of the foulest scenes and blackest crimes in the history of Christendom may be re-enacted in Europe. "The true test of a man is not what he does, but what, with the principles he holds, he would do"; and if this be true of individuals, it is still more intensely true of communities. They do good service, therefore, who keep before the public mind the real character of Rome as the present day development of the apostasy.

But when these writers go on to assert that the predictions of the Antichrist have their full and final realization in the Papacy, their position becomes a positive danger to the truth. It is maintained at the cost

of rejecting some of the most definite of the prophecies, and of putting a lax or fanciful interpretation upon those very Scriptures to which they appeal.

Indeed, the chief practical evil of this system of interpretation is that it creates and fosters a habit of reading the Scriptures in a loose and superficial manner. General impressions, derived from a cursory perusal of the prophecies, are seized upon and systematized, and upon this foundation a pretentious superstructure is built up. As already noticed, the Church of Rome displays the chief moral lineaments of the Man of Sin. Therefore it is an axiom of interpretation with this school that the ten-horned beast is the Papacy. But of the beast it is written that "power was given to him over all kindreds and tongues and nations, and all that dwell upon the earth shall worship him, whose names are not written in the book of life." (Revelation 13:7, 8) Are these commentators aware that one-half of Christendom is outside the pale of Rome, and in antagonism to the claims of the Papacy? Or do they suppose that all who belong to the Greek and Protestant Churches are enrolled in the book of life? By no means. But they would tell us the verse does not mean exactly what it says.[1]

1. According to these interpreters, such a statement must be taken cum grano salis, as we term it; and the like remark applies to their rendering of every verse of the thirteenth chapter of Revelation.

Again, the ten-horned beast is the Papacy; the second beast, the false prophet, is the Papal clergy; Babylon is Papal Rome. And yet when we turn to the vision of the judgment of Babylon, we find that it is by the agency of the beast that her doom is accomplished! "And the ten horns which thou sawest, and the beast, these shall hate the whore (Babylon), and shall make her desolate, and naked, and shall eat her flesh and burn her with fire; for God hath put in their hearts to fulfill His will, and to agree, and give their kingdom unto the beast, until the words of God shall be fulfilled." "These have one mind, and shall give their power and strength unto the beast." [2] The governments of Christendom, therefore, are to lend their power to the Roman Pontiff and priesthood in order to the destruction of Papal Rome! [3] Can absurdity be more transparent and complete?

2. Revelation 17:16, 17, 18. In ver. 16 the best reading, as given in the Revised Version, is "and the beast," instead of "upon the beast."

3. Mr. Elliott's romance on this subject is disposed of by the events of recent years, which have made Rome the peaceful capital of Italy. Of the beast and false prophet it is written, "These both were cast alive into a lake of fire" (Revelation 19:20). It may be pleasing to Protestant zeal to suppose the Roman hierarchy and priesthood are "reserved" for such a fate.

The question here at issue must not be prejudiced by misrepresentations, or shirked by turning away to collateral points of secondary moment. It is not whether great crises in the history of Christendom, such as the fall of Paganism, the rise of the Papacy and of the Moslem power, and the Protestant reformation of the sixteenth century, be within the scope of the visions of St. John. This may readily be conceded. Neither is it whether the fact that the chronology of some of these events is marked by cycles of years composed of the precise multiples; of seventy specified in the book of Daniel and the Apocalypse, be not a further proof that all forms; part of one great plan. Every fresh discovery of the kind ought to be welcomed by all lovers of the truth. Instead of weakening confidence in the accuracy and definiteness of the prophecies, it ought to strengthen the faith which looks for their absolute and literal fulfillment. The question is not whether the history of Christendom was within the view of the Divine Author of the prophecies, but whether those prophecies have been fulfilled; not whether those Scriptures have the

scope and meaning which historical interpreters assign to them, but whether their scope and meaning be exhausted and satisfied by the events to which they appeal as the fulfillment of them. It is unnecessary, therefore, to enter here upon an elaborate review of the historical system of interpretation, for if it fails when tested at some one vital point, it breaks down altogether.

Does the Apocalypse, then, belong to the sphere of prophecy accomplished? Or, to reduce the controversy to a still narrower issue, have the visions of the seals and trumpets and vials been fulfilled? No one will dispute the fairness of this mode of stating the question, and the fairest possible method of dealing with it will be to set forth some one of the leading visions, and then quote fully and verbatim what the historical interpreters put forward as the meaning of it.

The opening of the sixth seal is thus recorded by St. John: "And I beheld when he had opened the sixth seal, and, lo, there was a great earthquake; and the sun became black as sackcloth of hair, and the moon became as blood; and the stars of heaven fell unto the earth, even as a fig-tree casteth her untimely figs, when she is shaken of a mighty wind. And the heaven departed as a scroll when it is rolled together; and every mountain and island were moved out of their places. And the kings of the earth, and the great men, and the rich men, and the chief captains, and the mighty men, and every bondman, and every freeman, hid themselves in the dens and in the rocks of the mountains; and said to the mountains and the rocks, Fall on us, and hide us from the face of Him that sitteth on the throne, and from the wrath of the Lamb; for the great day of His wrath is come, and who shall be able to stand?" (Revelation 6:12-17)

The following is Mr. Elliott's commentary upon the vision:

"When we consider," he declares, "the terrors of these Christ-blaspheming kings of the Roman earth, thus routed with their partisans before the Christian host, and miserably flying and perishing, there was surely that in the event which, according to the usual construction of such Scripture figures, might well be deemed to answer to the symbols of the profigurative vision before us: in which vision kings and generals, freemen and slaves, appeared flying to and seeking the caves of the rocks to hide them: to hide them from the face of Him that sat on the throne of power, even from the wrath of the Lamb.

"Thus under the first shocks of this great earthquake had the Roman earth been agitated, and the enemies of the Christians destroyed or driven into flight and consternation. Thus, in the political heavens, had the sun of pagan supremacy been darkened, the moon become eclipsed and blood-red, and of the stars not a few been shaken violently to the ground. But the prophecy had not as yet received its entire fulfillment. The stars of the pagan heaven had not all fallen, nor had the heaven itself been altogether rolled up like a scroll and vanished away. On Constantine's first triumph, and after the first terrors of the opposing emperors and their hosts, though their imperial edict gave to Christianity its full rights and freedom, yet it allowed to the heathen worship a free toleration also. But very soon there followed measures of marked preference in the imperial appointments to the Christians and their faith. And at length, as Constantine advanced in life, in spite of the indignation and resentment of the pagans, he issued edicts for the suppression of their sacrifices, the destruction of their temples, and the toleration of no other form of public worship but the Christian. His successors on the throne followed up the same object by attaching penalties of the severest character to the public profession of paganism. And the result was that, before the century, had ended, its stars had all fallen to the ground, its very heaven, or political and religious system, vanished, and on the earth the old pagan institutions, laws, rites, and worship been all but annihilated." [4]

4. Horae Apoc., vol. 1., pp. 219, 220.

"A more notable instance of inadequate interpretation cannot be imagined." [5] What wonder if men scoff at the awful warnings of coming wrath, when they are told that THE GREAT DAY OF HIS WRATH [6] is past, and that it amounted to nothing more than the rout of the pagan armies before the hosts of Constantine, - an event which has been paralleled a thousand times in the history of the world? [7]

5. "Another such landmark is found, I believe, in the interpretation of the sixth seal: if it be not indeed already laid down in what has just been said. We all know what that imagery means in the rest of Scripture. Any system which requires it to belong to another period than the close approach of the great day of the Lord, stands thereby self-condemned. I may illustrate this by reference to Mr. Elliott's continuous historical system, which requires that it should mean the downfall of paganism under Constantine. A more notable instance of inadequate interpretation cannot be imagined. Closely connected with this last is another fixed point in interpretation. As the seven seals, so the seven trumpets and the seven vials run on to the time close upon the end. At the termination of each series, the note is unmistakably given that such is the case. Of the seals we have already spoken. As to the trumpets, it may suffice to refer to ch. 10:7; 11:18; as to the vials, to their very designation *tas eschatas*, and to the *gegonen* of ch. 16:17. Any system which does not recognize this common ending of the three, seems to me to stand thereby convicted of error." - ALFORD, *Gr. Test.*, 4., Part 2., ch. 8., §§ 5, 21, 22.

6. *ha hamera ha megala tas orgas autou* (Revelation 6:17).

7. If such statements were put forward in wantonness, and not in folly, they would suggest a reference to the solemn words, "If any man shall take away from the words of the book of this prophecy -" (Revelation 22:19).

For, let the point at issue be clearly kept in view. If the reign of Constantine or some other era in the history of Christendom were appealed to as affording an intermediate fulfillment of the vision, it might pass as a feeble but harmless exposition; but these expositors daringly assert that the prophecy has no other scope or meaning. [8] They are bound to prove that the vision of the sixth seal has been fulfilled; else it is obvious that all which follows it claims fulfillment likewise. If, therefore, their system failed at this point alone, its failure would be absolute and complete; but in fact the instance quoted is no more than a fair example of the manner in which they fritter away the meaning of the words they profess to explain.

8. When the historical interpreters approach the Second Advent, they lose the courage of their opinions, and earnestly contend for literalness, though if their scheme be genuine, the predicted return of Christ may surely have its fulfillment in the present revival of religion and the concurrent spread of Christianity.

We are now, they tell us, in the era of the Vials. At this very hour the wrath of God is being poured out upon the earth. [9] Surely men may well exclaim, - comparing the present with the past, and judging this age to be more favored, more desirable to live in than any age which has preceded it, - Is this all the wrath of God amounts to! The vials are the seven last plagues, "for in them is filled up the wrath of God," and we are told that the sixth is even at this moment being fulfilled in the disruption of the Turkish Empire! Can any man be so lost in the dreamland of his own lucubrations as to imagine that the collapse of the Turkish power is a Divine judgment on an unrepentant world! [10] Such it may appear to be to the clique of Pachas, who, ghoulishly, fatten on the misery around them; but untold millions would hail it as a blessing to suffering humanity, and ask with wonder, If this be a crowning token of the wrath of God, how are simple souls to distinguish between the proofs of His favor and of His direst anger!

9. And I saw another sign in heaven, great and marvelous, seven angels having the seven last plagues, for in them is filled up the wrath of God...And the seven angels came out of the temple, having the seven plagues...And one of the four beasts gave unto the seven angels seven golden vials, full of the wrath of God, who liveth for ever and ever...And I heard a great voice out of the temple saying to the seven angels, Go your ways, and pour out the vials of the wrath of God upon the earth" (Revelation 15:1, 6, 7; 16:1).

10. The Austrian Pester Lloyd of 21st Nov., 1879, in commenting on the British line of policy with regard to Turkish affairs, charged Lord Beaconsfield's government with "confounding Mohammedanism with the Turks, the latter having been always regarded as the scum of Mohammedanism by all Mohammedan nations who were conscious of their own strength." Prophetic students appear to be thoroughly possessed by this error.

If the event were cited as a primary fulfillment, within this day of grace, of a prophecy which strictly belongs to the coming day of wrath, it would merit respectful attention; but to appeal to the dismemberment of Turkey as the full realization of the vision, is the merest trifling with the solemn language of Scripture, and an outrage on common sense.

But there are principles involved in this system of interpretation far deeper and more momentous than any which appear upon the surface. It is in direct antagonism with the great foundation truth of Christianity.

St. Luke narrates (Luke 4:19, 20) how, after the temptation, the Lord "returned in the power of the Spirit into Galilee," and entering the synagogue of Nazareth on the Sabbath day, as His custom was, He stood up to read. There was handed Him the book of Isaiah's prophecy, and all eyes being fastened on Him, He opened it and read these words, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because He hath anointed me to preach the gospel to the poor; He hath sent me to heal the broken-hearted, to preach deliverance to the captives, and the recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty them that are bruised, to preach the acceptable year of the Lord."

"And the day of vengeance of our God" are the words which followed, without a break, upon the open page before Him; but, the record adds, "He closed the book, and He gave it again to the minister, and sat down." In an age to come, when the prophecy shall have its ultimate fulfillment, the day of vengeance shall mingle with blessing to His people.[11] But the burden of His ministry on earth was only peace.[12] And it is the burden of the gospel still. God's attitude toward men is grace. "GRACE REIGNS." It is not that there is grace for the penitent or the elect, but that grace is the principle on which Christ now sits upon the throne of God. "Upon His head are many crowns, but His pierced hand now holds the only scepter," for the Father has given Him the kingdom; all power is His in heaven and on earth. "The Father judgeth no man, but hath committed all judgment to the Son"; (John 5:22; Compare 3:17; 12:47) but His mission to earth was not to judge, but only to save. And He who is thus the only Judge is now exalted to be a Savior, and the throne on which He sits is a throne of grace. Grace is reigning, through righteousness, unto eternal life. (Romans 5:21) "The light of this glorious gospel now shines unhindered upon earth. Blind eyes may shut it out, but they cannot quench or lessen it. Impenitent hearts may heap up wrath against the day of wrath, but they cannot darken this day of mercy or mar the glory of the reign of grace." [13]

11. Compare Isaiah 63:4: "For the day of vengeance is in mine heart, and the year of my redeemed is come."

12. "He came and preached peace" (Ephesians 2:17).

13. The Gospel and its Ministry, p. 136. True it is that the great principles of God's moral government of the world remain unchanged, and sin is thus ever working out its own punishment. But this must not be confounded with immediate Divine action in judgment. "The Lord knoweth how to reserve the unjust to the day of judgment, to be punished" (2 Peter 2:9). Or, according to Romans 2:5, "After thy hardness and impenitent heart treasurest up unto thyself wrath against the day of wrath."

It will be in "the day of wrath" that the "seven last plagues," wherein is "filled up the wrath of God," shall run their course; and it is merely trifling with solemn and awful truths to talk of their being now fulfilled. Whatever intermediate fulfillment the vision may be now receiving, the full and final realization of it belongs to a future time.

And these pages are not designed to deal with the primary and historical fulfillment of the prophecies, or, as Lord Bacon terms it, their "springing and germinant accomplishment throughout many ages." My subject is exclusively the absolute and final fulfillment of the visions in that "one age" to which, in their "height and fullness," they belong.

The Scripture itself affords many striking instances of such intermediate or primary fulfillment; and in these the main outlines of the prophecy are realized, but not the details. The prediction of Elijah's advent is an instance.[14] In the plainest terms the Lord declared the Baptist's ministry to be within the scope of that prophecy. In terms as clear He announced that it would be fulfilled in days to come, by the reappearance upon earth of the greatest of the prophets. (Matthew 11:14; 17:11, 12) St. Peter's words at Pentecost afford another illustration. Joel's prophecy shall yet be realized to the letter, but yet the baptism of the Holy Ghost was referred to it by the inspired Apostle. (Joel 2:28-32; Acts 2:16-21.)

14. "Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet, before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the Lord" (Malachi. 4:5).

To speak of the fulfillment of these prophecies as already past, is to use language at once unscriptural and false. Far more unwarrantable still is the assertion of finality, so confidently made, of the prophecies relating to the apostasy. There is not a single prophecy, of which the fulfillment 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 fulfillment was inaugurated after the sacred canon closed.

Two thousand years ago who would have ventured to believe that the prophecies of Messiah would receive a literal accomplishment!

"Behold, a virgin shall conceive, and bear a son." (Isaiah 7:14)

"Behold, thy King cometh unto thee: He is just, and having salvation; lowly, and riding upon an ass, and upon a colt the foal of an ass." (Zechariah 9:9)

"They weighed for my price thirty pieces of silver;" "And I took the thirty pieces of silver and cast them to the potter in the house of the Lord." (Zechariah 11:12, 13; Compare Matthew 27:5, 7)

"They part my garments among them, and cast lots upon my vesture." (Psalm 22:18 Compare John 19:23, 24.)

"They pierced my hands and my feet." (Psalm 22:16)

"They gave me vinegar to drink." (Psalm 69:21)

"He was cut off out of the land of the living; for the transgression of my people was He stricken." (Isaiah 53:8)

To the prophets themselves, even, the meaning of such words was a mystery. (1 Peter 1:10-12) For the most part, doubtless, men regarded them as no more than poetry or legend. And yet these prophecies of the advent and death of Christ received their fulfillment in every jot and tittle of them. Literalness of fulfillment may therefore be accepted as an axiom to guide us in the study of prophecy.

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