THE INTERPRETATION OF OLD TESTAMENT PROPHECY

by
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This article will take a broad overview of the process of interpreting prophecy and will suggest some aspects of expositional procedure. Perhaps there is no category of Scripture that is more neglected in to-day's preaching than Old Testament prophecy. No doubt there are a few prophetic texts containing direct Messianic prediction that receive some attention. At Christmas, for instance, one might expect to hear a sermon on Isaiah 9:6–7. The vast majority of prophetic texts, however, have remained utterly ignored. The typical fundamental pastor may not preach from Old Testament prophecy in any expository manner for years. This situation is probably due to a sense of frustration that many expositors experience as they study a prophetic passage. The message seems on the surface far removed from today. As a result of an inability to bridge the gap between what a prophetic text meant to the original audience and what it means to the believer today, many interpreters have divorced prophecy from its historical context of dramatic interest and have failed to see the prophet as one who sought to meet the needs of his day with the revealed Word of God. Perhaps this situation has resulted from an overreaction to the rationalist's insistence that prophecy is nothing more than the sage insight of astute men who sought to challenge and comfort their people close to the supposed fulfillment of their extremely short-range predictions. The wise interpreter, however, will affirm both the supernaturally predictive elements of prophecy and its applicability to the needs of the prophet's contemporary audience. Only by understanding the meaning of a prophetic text to the original hearers is it possible to derive legitimate application to the modern audience.

UNDERSTANDING THE PROPHET'S MESSAGE TO THE ORIGINAL AUDIENCE

In one sense, the exegetical process in interpreting prophecy is no

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different from other categories of biblical material. The same elements of lexical/syntactical, contextual, cultural/historical, theological, and literary analysis the interpreter uses throughout the Bible, he uses in the Old Testament prophetic literature as well. There are some special considerations, however, that apply in the hermeneutics of prophecy. The seventh chapter of Isaiah will serve as a hermeneutic laboratory for exploring these distinctive elements. Perhaps actual examples of theory in practice will aid the reader in applying interpretational principles in his own study.

Lexical/Syntactical Analysis

Since conservatives believe in the verbal, plenary inspiration of the Bible, the precise meaning of words and their grammatical relationships with each other in a sentence are of utmost importance. Prophecy is not a grand puzzle, full of statements that manifest *sensus plenior.*[1] Rather, any biblical statement means exactly one thing—the sum total of individual word meanings, each with a specific grammatical function. If the interpreter opens the door to multiple meanings, there is no longer any objective basis for determining the sense of written words. The Bible is more than mere literature, but it is literature. God did not invent new forms of communication when He gave man His Word. The Bible must be interpreted in a straightforward manner according to rules that govern the meaning of any human literature.

Lexical and syntactical elements are not of peripheral importance in the determination of prophetic meaning. They are the meaning. Consider Isaiah's statement in 7:14, a battleground of biblical interpretation for centuries: "Therefore the Lord himself shall give you a sign; Behold, a virgin shall conceive, and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel." The Hebrew word translated "therefore" (לָכֵן) conveys the idea of "since this is so."[2] It gives the logical conclusion to an antecedent

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[1]The question of whether or not there is a deeper meaning to prophecy than the prophet himself knew or intended has been a source of debate throughout the history of interpretation. To affirm the existence of *sensus plenior,* in my opinion, is to open the door to a subjectivity in interpretation that has no definable limits. For more discussion of the topic, see Henry A. Virkler, *Hermeneutics: Principles and Processes of Biblical Interpretation* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1981), pp. 25–27. In support of the idea that God's intent for prophecy transcends the meaning of the prophet's words, see Raju D. Kunjummen, "The Single Intent of Scripture—Critical Examination of a Theological Construct," *Grace Theological Journal* 7 (Spring 1986): 81–110. For a discussion that is less supportive of *sensus plenior,* see Jack R. Riggs, "The 'Fuller Meaning' of Scripture: A Hermeneutical Question for Evangelicals," *Grace Theological Journal* 7 (Fall 1986): 213–27.

[2]See Francis Brown, S. R. Driver, and Charles A. Briggs, *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, n.d.), p. 486.

situation. Ahaz had just refused the Lord's gracious offer of a miraculous sign to persuade him to believe what God had said about the military danger he faced (vv. 10–12). Because of Ahaz's unbelief, God turned to the "house of David" (v. 13). The "you" of verse 14 is plural. God was no longer addressing Ahaz. The promise of Immanuel was for the entire Davidic dynasty. Simply by failing to identify a plural pronoun, one can miss the proper interpretation of a whole section of prophecy. Walter Mueller, for example, stated that "in the context of Isaiah 7 we find that the birth of the child whose name was to be Immanuel was to be a sign from God *to King Ahaz* indicating the nearness of the conquest of both the Northern and the Southern kingdoms by the king of Assyria. Since the birth of this child was to be *a sign to Ahaz,* it is only logical to conclude that the birth took place during the lifetime and reign of Ahaz. This would, therefore, necessitate an immediate, partial fulfillment of the prophecy of Isaiah 7:14."[3] Indeed, Mueller's reasoning is logical, as he has read the verse; but he has not properly identified the antecedent of the plural pronoun.

It is easy to pass by the various names of God without noting the significance of which name is used in a certain context. The word "Lord" in 7:14 is אֲדֹנָי. Hindson noted that "the covenant name *yhwh* is not used here. Usually, Isaiah uses *ªdonai* to emphasize the Lord's omnipotence. It is He alone who can give such a sign as will follow."[4] The word for sign, אוֹת, does not always mean something miraculous, but the context certainly calls for such a meaning here. Isaiah had offered Ahaz a sign "in the depth, or in the height above" (v. 11). The king could have asked for the moon to turn into green cheese, or for the subterranean depths to open and spew out molten gold. Since Ahaz refused a miraculous sign, it seems logical that God would give the nation a similar sign someday.

Perhaps it seems odd that God would give a sign for people living far into the future. There were of two kinds of signs. Sometimes they were given as present persuaders,

> designed to promote some action or reaction in the immediate present. With such signs Moses was sent to the people in Egypt (Exod 4:8, 9)…. The alternative understanding of "sign" is that it is a "future confirmation," i.e. it is designed to follow a series of events, to confirm them as acts of God and to fix a stated interpretation upon them. Exodus 3:12 is a sign of this order. The gathering of Israel on Sinai seals the divine commission to Moses and confirms as from God the forecast of the course and significance

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[3]Walter Mueller, "A Virgin Shall Conceive," *Evangelical Quarterly* 32 (October–December 1960): 205–6. Italics added.

[4]Edward E. Hindson, "Isaiah's Immanuel," *Grace Journal* 10 (Fall 1969): 5.

of the events leading up to the sign.[5]

Isaiah 7:14 was a "future confirmation" sign. When the virgin conceived, the nation would realize that God has the power to deliver. Ahaz had refused to place his confidence in God as Deliverer, but the virgin birth of Immanuel would confirm forever that God can save to the uttermost those who come to Him.

The next lexical component for consideration is the word עַלְמָה. Niessen analyzed the nine uses of the word in the Old Testament.[6] Sometimes the word seems to be a musical term, equivalent to the modern term "soprano," or "choir of young women." Other uses make a statement concerning moral purity. After Abraham's servant prayed that God would send the virgin (עַלְמָה) He had appointed to be Isaac's bride (Gen 24:43), Rebekah approached the servant and offered water for him and his camels. Verse 16 states that "the damsel [נַעֲרָה] was very fair to look upon, a virgin [בְּתוּלָה], neither had any man known her." The term עַלְמָה in this passage is so unambiguous that it needed no qualifying statement, whereas its more common synonym, בְּתוּלָה, required the further statement, "neither had any man known her." Niessen also discussed Proverbs 30:19, a verse that some interpreters have viewed as proof of immorality on the part of the עַלְמָה. This verse describes four things that are unfathomable: "the way of an eagle in the air; the way of a serpent upon a rock; the way of a ship in the midst of the sea; and the way of a man with a maid (עַלְמָה). Niessen concluded that

> considering the morality of ancient Hebrew ethical standards, a scene of fornication would be revolting rather than awe-inspiring and would hardly fit the parallels of the first three "ways." Obviously what is being described here is the courtship and infatuation of youthful love between a young man and his girl friend. While the passage does not specifically make a point about the girl's virginity, it may be presumed.[7]

The עַלְמָה was a young woman of marriageable age whose virginity was unquestioned.

As God gave Isaiah a view of the future, the prophet did not see just any virgin. He saw *the* virgin. The Hebrew word has the article. Even though this particular virgin was unknown to the prophet, and was still in the future, he had a clear picture of who she was.[8] The situation the

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[5]J. A. Motyer, "Context and Content in the Interpretation of Isaiah 7:14," *Tyndale Bulletin* 21 (1970): 120.

[6]Richard Niessen, "The Virginity of the עַלְמָה in Isaiah 7:14," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 137 (April–June 1980): 133–50.

[7]Niessen, "The Virginity of the עַלְמָה," p. 140.

[8]"Peculiar to Hebrew is the employment of the article to denote a single person or

Lord presented to Isaiah must have amazed him, because this virgin would be sexually pure and pregnant at the same time. The English versions fail to reflect this situation because they use the future tense: "Behold, a virgin *shall conceive,* and bear a son" (KJV, italics added). The Hebrew word translated "shall conceive" is הָרָה. Hindson noted that "the form הָרָה is neither a verb nor a participle, but a feminine adjective.… This usage is similar then to the annunciation of the Angel of the Lord to Hagar in the wilderness: 'Behold! thou art pregnant and wilt bear a son' (Gen 16:12)."[9] Hindson's association of Genesis 16:11 (he erroneously stated it as verse 12) and Isaiah 7:14 is quite important:

> Genesis 16:11   הִנָּ֥ךְ הָרָ֖ה וְיֹלַ֣דְתְּ בֵּ֑ן

> Isaiah 7:14   הִנֵּ֣ה הָעַלְמָ֗ה הָרָה֙ וְיֹלֶ֣דֶת בֵּ֔ן

The only substantive difference between the two statements is the use of the waw perfect of ילד in Genesis 16:11 ("and you will bear") and the active participle in Isaiah 7:14. Isaiah used the participle to describe an imminent event: "Behold! the virgin is pregnant and about to bear a son."[10] The proper lexical/syntactical analysis of 7:14 does not permit the interpreter to conclude that Isaiah spoke of a young woman who was a virgin when the prophecy was given and then later married and bore a son. Rather, she is a virgin and pregnant at the same time! Here is a sign that truly matches our expectation for something "in the depth, or in the height above" (7:11). Isaiah 7:14 does not allow for a typological fulfillment.[11] Its fulfillment is directly predictive. The only woman in

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thing (primarily one which is as yet unknown, and therefore not capable of being defined) as being present to the mind under given circumstances" (E. Kautzsch, ed., *Gesenius' Hebrew Grammar* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1910], ¶126q.). Future references to Gesenius will be abbreviated GK.

[9]Hindson, "Isaiah's Immanuel," p. 34.

[10]GK, ¶116p; see the *futurum instans.*

[11]Walter C. Kaiser, Jr. is an example of someone who argued for the typological view. He maintained that Hezekiah was Immanuel: "I would like to boldly suggest that only Hezekiah meets all the demands of the text of Isaiah and yet demonstrates how he could be part and parcel of that climactic messianic person who would complete all that is predicted in this Immanuel prophecy" (*Toward an Old Testament Theology* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1978], p. 210). The assertion that "only Hezekiah meets all the demands of the text of Isaiah" is hardly a statement one would expect from such a normally careful exegete. Exegetical considerations aside, the best chronology indicates that Hezekiah was eleven years old when he began his coregency with Ahaz in 729/28. This means Hezekiah was born in 740, five years before Isaiah spoke his prophecy to Ahaz! For a discussion of this chronology, see Harold G. Stigers, "The Interphased Chronology of Jotham, Ahaz, Hezekiah, and Hoshea," *Bulletin of the Evangelical Theological Society* 9 (Spring 1966): 88–89.

the history of the world to be pregnant while a virgin was Mary, the mother of Jesus.

The final lexical element of 7:14 is the name "Immanuel." The name is a noun clause: "God is with us." In Hebrew usage the "name" was often descriptive of the person to whom it was given. Genesis 25:25, for instance, says that Rebekah's first-born son "came out red, all over like an hairy garment; and they called his name Esau ['hairy']." Only one person in history could fulfill the description of "Immanuel," and that Person was the divine/human Son of God.

The study of lexical/syntactical considerations is not an easy task—even for someone who possesses facility in Hebrew. There must be an adequate appropriation of time for the process of studying the Hebrew text, doing word studies, and consulting the Hebrew grammars. Within the constraints of the pastor's busy schedule, study time must be a priority within a balanced allotment of precious hours. Careful exegesis cannot be rushed. It is an unfortunate reality that many pastors never studied the ancient languages in seminary, or they obtained no training beyond the undergraduate level. Such individuals are not without hope. Excellent word study books, such as the *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament,*[12] are keyed to Strong's numbering system for facility in finding the correct entry. Exegetical commentaries offer help in understanding important grammatical points. The wise pastor will budget sufficient funds for the continual improvement of his study tools.

Contextual Analysis

The next exegetical component in understanding the message to the original audience is contextual analysis. Through the process of decontextualization, a person can make a biblical text mean nearly anything he wants. Interpreters must guard carefully against this enemy of sound exegesis. There are various levels of context: the immediate context within a paragraph, the relation of paragraphs within a pericope, the development of pericopes in a section, and the macroscopic contribution of sections in the overall message of a book. By keeping a macroscopic perspective, the interpreter can maintain his bearings as he navigates through the many exegetical details he must consider. Contextual analysis is also crucial when the interpretational labor is complete and the exegete prepares a series of messages to preach. As he delivers his sermons, the expositor must communicate to his audience the same understanding of the larger picture that he has achieved. This allows the audience to integrate the many details they will hear into a matrix of the

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[12]R. Laird Harris, Gleason L. Archer, Jr., and Bruce K. Waltke, eds., *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament,* 2 vols. (Chicago: Moody Press, 1980).

book's overall theme and purpose.

Interpreters who hold to the typological view of Isaiah 7:14 routinely bring the charge of decontextualization against those who see the verse as a direct prediction of the virgin birth of Christ. Supposedly, the context demands some fulfillment during Ahaz's day.[13] As previously discussed, however, Isaiah 7:14 was not a promise to Ahaz and therefore did not demand a fulfillment in his day. An important contextual element within the paragraph level that seems on the surface to contradict this conclusion is the prediction that "before the child shall know to refuse the evil, and choose the good, the land that thou abhorrest shall be forsaken of both her kings" (7:16). Mueller stated that Isaiah 8:3–4 was the short-term fulfillment of 7:16.[14] Isaiah 8:3–4 says,

> And I went unto the prophetess; and she conceived, and bare a son. Then said the LORD to me, Call his name Maher-shal-al-hash-baz. For before the child shall have knowledge to cry, My father, and my mother, the riches of Damascus and the spoil of Samaria shall be taken away before the king of Assyria.

There is an undeniable connection between 7:16 and 8:4, but the relationship is not one of prediction and fulfillment. Isaiah's wife did not name her son Immanuel. If the directly predictive, Messianic view of 7:14 is correct, then before Christ was old enough to discern good from evil (a relatively young age), both Israel and Syria had long ceased to be a threat to Judah. Isaiah 8:3–4 was the short-range prophecy fulfilled by the birth of Isaiah's son, and 7:14 was the long-range prediction of the Messiah. Someone might object that those who heard Isaiah's message would never have been able to identify such a chronological distinction. This objection has some degree of validity. The term "long-range" is actually appropriate only from the vantage point of the modern interpreter. Isaiah's original audience should have understood 7:14 as establishing the concept of the imminent birth of Immanuel. Messiah could have been born of a virgin during Ahaz's day. No one knew when the event would take place. One thing is certain: by the time Christ was born, the Pekah/Rezin alliance was no longer a threat to Judah!

The overall context of Isaiah 7–11, a section of the book commonly

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[13]H. C. Leupold, for example, stated that "a contemporary person is almost demanded by the very situation involved. Yet no such a one can be pointed to with any measure of assurance. At the same time a contemporary *child* seems to be inexorably demanded by the passage" (*Exposition of Isaiah,* 2 vols. [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1968], 1:157, italics original). Likewise, Kaiser asserted that "before this son, the most recent birth in the line of David, was able to understand right from wrong (7:16–17), a political revolution of major proportions would remove both Pekah and Rezin from power" (*Toward an Old Testament Theology,* p. 209).

[14]Mueller, "A Virgin Shall Conceive," p. 206.

called "the book of Immanuel," supports the long-range predictive significance of 7:14. Isaiah 8:8, for instance, describes Judah as "thy land, O Immanuel." It is difficult to see how Judah could be Immanuel's land if this child would be a mere human. Verse ten even states that Immanuel is the land's protection against foreign aggression. Chapter nine describes how this child could be such a formidable military genius: "For unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given: and the government shall be upon his shoulder: and his name shall be called Wonderful, Counsellor, The mighty God, The everlasting Father, the Prince of Peace" (v. 6). The term "mighty God" could be translated "God who is a valiant warrior." Isaiah never employs this Hebrew word for God (אֵל) in reference to anyone but the true God of heaven. Comparison with Isaiah 10:20–21 shows that "the mighty God" is another name for the Holy One of Israel.[15] These verses prove that Immanuel will be divine and human at the same time. Far from supporting the typological view of Isaiah 7:14, the surrounding context demands the directly predictive, messianic view.

Cultural/Historical Analysis

The prophets did not speak in a cultural vacuum. Just as modern man lives in the midst of continual political intrigue and massive world forces, so did people in Bible times. Isaiah 7 describes an event that put the nation of Judah in great peril. Pekah of Israel and Rezin of Syria had joined a tax revolt against Assyria. Because the two kings did not wish to have a pro-Assyrian ally on their southern flank, they moved to eliminate Ahaz and replace him with a puppet king named the son of Tabeel. Rezin marched down the King's Highway, enlisted the support of the Edomites, and attacked Ahaz from the south. Pekah attacked from the north. Emboldened by the success of the foreign aggressors, the Philistines moved against Ahaz from the west. The Judeans suffered massive casualties. The only thing standing between Ahaz and destruction was the well-fortified condition of Jerusalem. At the point when Pekah and Rezin joined forces for a final offensive against Jerusalem, God sent Isaiah to assure Ahaz that the threat he faced would not succeed. Ahaz was unwilling, however, to believe God's word. He even piously refused the miraculous sign that God offered to him. Instead of believing God's Word, Ahaz sent a large tribute payment to the Assyrian king, Tiglath-pileser III, asking for deliverance from Pekah and Rezin. The Assyrian was very eager to oblige Ahaz.[16] Ahaz thought he had been

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[15]See Edward J. Young, *The Book of Isaiah,* 3 vols. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1965), 1:336.

[16]For a more complete discussion of these historic details, see Eugene H. Merrill,

very clever in purchasing his own deliverance, but Isaiah had warned him in 7:9 that if he would not declare God to be reliable (Hiph'il of אמן), he would not be reliable (Niph'al of אמן).[17] In just six years, Hezekiah became coregent with his father, and Ahaz lost his power. More importantly, however, Ahaz gave clear evidence that he would not stand by faith in a righteous condition before God. It was within this scene of dramatic historical intrigue that God gave His promise of Immanuel's birth. If the interpreter does not understand what situation the prophet addressed, it becomes very difficult—even impossible— for him to make correct application of the prophecy to today.

Theological Analysis

The proper interpretation of prophecy also demands a sensitivity to the contribution of biblical theology. Biblical theology centers on what God has explicitly revealed about Himself. Through inductive study of the Old Testament data, utilizing methodologies such as book theologies, subject studies, and word studies, the interpreter draws general conclusions concerning biblical teaching. Of particular importance is the concept of progressive revelation.[18] Since the Lord did not deposit a complete revelation of Himself to man at one point in history, the interpreter must be able to place himself within a particular chronological time frame and ask what someone living in that time would have understood about a particular theological issue. For example, the seventh chapter of Isaiah presents Ahaz as very worried about the future of the Davidic monarchy. The Pekah/Rezin alliance was seeking to depose Ahaz and install a non-Davidic king in his place. Isaiah sought to calm the king's fears: "Take heed, and be quiet; fear not, neither be faint-hearted" (7:4). Ahaz should have been able to recall God's past revelation concerning the perpetuity of David's lineage:

> And when thy days be fulfilled, and thou shalt sleep with thy fathers, I will set up thy seed after thee, which shall proceed out of thy bowels, and I will

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Kingdom of Priests: A History of Old Testament Israel (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1987), pp. 405–7; Leon J. Wood, *A Survey of Israel's History,* rev. David O'Brien (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1986), pp. 301–3; and John Bright, *A History of Israel,* 3rd ed. (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1981), pp. 273–8.

[17]J. A. Motyer cleverly translated this phrase, "If you do not stand by faith, indeed you will not stand at all" (*The Prophecy of Isaiah* [Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993], p. 82).

[18]For more information on the difference between biblical and systematic theology, see Robert D. Bell, "Introduction: What is Biblical Theology?" *Biblical Viewpoint,* 15 (November 1981): 80–83; and J. Barton Payne, *The Theology of the Older Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1962), pp. 15–24. No expositor of prophecy should be without a well-worn copy of Payne's book.

establish his kingdom. He shall build an house for my name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom for ever. I will be his father, and he shall be my son. If he commit iniquity, I will chasten him with the rod of men, and with the stripes of the children of men: But my mercy shall not depart away from him, as I took it from Saul, whom I put away before thee. And thine house and thy kingdom shall be established for ever before thee: thy throne shall be established for ever (2 Sam 7:12–16).

This unconditional covenant should have been Ahaz's confidence. Although an individual king might cut himself off from the temporal benefits of the Davidic covenant through disobedience to the Lord, God never goes back on what He has promised. Ahaz was such a wicked idolater that he had no place in his heart for trust in God's great covenant.[19] Biblical theology assists the interpreter in placing himself within the circle of theological knowledge of a person living during the period in which the prophet delivered his message. Failure to accomplish this process will result in imposing the full theological knowledge of the New Testament back into the Old Testament prophetic texts.[20]

Literary Analysis

The final element of the exegetical process involves an awareness of literary elements. Although the Bible is more than mere literature, it is literature nonetheless. God did not invent new literary forms for communicating His truth to man. Prophecy is comprised of both narrative and poetic material. Isaiah 7 is a mixture of both forms, and the editors of the *Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia* were careful to arrange the Hebrew text so that each form is apparent. Verses 1–6, 10–17, and 24–25 are narrative; and 7–9 and 18–23 are poetic. Narrative sections recount historical details and the words and actions of the characters in the story. Narrative usually teaches implicitly through these elements. The narrative author makes his point sometimes by which historic details he includes or excludes and by his arrangement of the details in a chronological or logical manner. The interpreter must seek to determine

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[19]For a discussion of the importance of God's promises in biblical theology, see Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., *Back Toward the Future: Hints for Interpreting Biblical Prophecy* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1989), pp. 95–105; and idem, *Toward An Old Testament Theology,* pp. 20–40.

[20]This caution against imposing the full theological view of the New Testament on the Old Testament text should not be misconstrued as a lack of appreciation for the completed canon of Scripture. The New Testament perspective will be crucial at the application stage of interpretation, but not at the exegetical level. The interpreter must first understand the message to the original audience, and then the fuller insight of progressive revelation will influence the application to today's believer.

the timeless principle that the details of the narrative develop.[21] Sometimes a principle is so important that the author includes the explicit statement of it. Isaiah 7:9b is such a principle: "If ye will not believe, surely ye shall not be established." In poetic sections, the interpreter must recognize the existence of semantic parallelism. The various types of parallelism include synonymous, antithetic, climactic, emblematic, and synthetic.[22]

A key element of literary analysis is an appreciation for figurative language. Prophecy is full of every imaginable form of it. The purpose of figurative language is not to abrogate literal meaning; rather, it is to enhance literal meaning by adding vivacity and memorable impact.[23] Isaiah 7:4, for example, contains a metaphor: "Take heed, and be quiet; fear not, neither be fainthearted for the two tails of these smoking firebrands, for the fierce anger of Rezin with Syria, and of the son of Remaliah." A metaphor contains three elements: a topic, an image, and a point of similarity. The image in this metaphor involving a campfire is the picture of logs that have nearly burned completely. They are still smoldering but just about to go out. The topic is the military threat posed by Pekah and Rezin. The point of similarity is that from the Lord's point of view these two kings were right at the end of their military careers. They were all but burned out and posed no serious threat. The situation appeared far different from this metaphoric picture as far as Ahaz was concerned, however, and the figure of speech failed to persuade the king to trust the Lord.[24]

Although many aspects of literary analysis are helpful to the

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[21]For discussion of exegetical considerations in narrative material, see Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., *Toward An Exegetical Theology: Biblical Exegesis for Preaching and Teaching* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1981), pp. 197–210; and Leland Ryken, *Words of Delight: A Literary Introduction to the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1987), pp. 35–156.

[22]For more information on parallelism, see Kaiser, *Toward An Exegetical Theology,* pp. 211–231; and A. Berkeley Mickelsen, *Interpreting the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1963), pp. 323–337.

[23]Consider the statement, "It was precipitating voluminously." The sentence would be fine in a scientific journal on meterology but fails to make much of a favorable impact on the average reader. If the sentence is reformulated in figurative language, it becomes much more interesting: "The rain was falling as if it were trying to drown every open-mouthed frog in the county." Note that in this example of simile combined with personification (with a little hyperbole thrown in for good measure) the intent of the figurative language is not to alter the literal idea that the rain is falling hard. The purpose of figurative speech in prophecy is likewise to enhance the literal meaning of the message in a way that arrests the attention of the prophet's hearers.

[24]For an interesting example of the power of figurative language, see Warren W. Wiersbe, *Preaching and Teaching with Imagination: The Quest for Biblical Ministry* (Wheaton: Victor Books, 1994), pp. 15–20.

interpreter, some methodologies offer little benefit—and may even be harmful by leading the exegete off the correct path into areas that will mire him down in fruitless considerations. One such methodology is form criticism. Theological liberals have employed form criticism to explain how Scripture could have developed from a process of naturalistic transmission of oral tradition over the centuries. As these traditions were modified by the cultural situation the people faced (*Sitz im Leben*), the various *genres* arose to meet ever-changing needs. These literary *genres* included hymns, lawsuits and other polemics, and salvation speeches. Finally, these oral traditions supposedly were put into writing and appear as the sacred texts we study today. Some conservatives, while recognizing that liberals have used this technique in a manner that is destructive of confidence in the Scripture, have postulated significant benefit for the use of form criticism by believing interpreters. Eugene Merrill, for example, concluded his survey of form critical studies in a portion of the book of Isaiah with the statement that "because it [form criticism] is only what its users make of it, it has the potential to provide hermeneutical and theological insight into the text in ways little imagined by those who refuse to take advantage of it."[25] Beside the dubious statement that form criticism is merely a neutral tool, a glaring problem with Merrill's article is the omission of even one example of the alleged insight this methodology might offer. If form criticism has the potential for unlocking such previously hidden exegetical perception, surely Merrill could whet the reader's appetite with one demonstration. It is distressing to see some conservatives giving such a *carte blanche* endorsement to ideas against which Kenneth Kitchen long ago brought serious objections.[26]

APPLYING THE MESSAGE TO
THE MODERN AUDIENCE

Once the interpreter has laid the proper exegetical foundation by lexical/syntactical, contextual, cultural/historical, theological, and literary analyses, he is now ready to state his interpretive conclusions in timeless language that applies directly to the modern audience. This is the most difficult part of the interpretive process. Many interpreters enjoy the objective discipline of exegesis but avoid the more subjective meditation required to bridge the gap between what the text meant to the original audience and what it means to the New Testament believer. Sermons based on exegesis alone may impress the hearers with the

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[25]Eugene H. Merrill, "Literary Genres in Isaiah 40–55," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 144 (April–June 1987): 156.

[26]See K. A. Kitchen, *Ancient Orient and Old Testament* (Chicago: InterVarsity Press, 1966), pp. 130-35.

preacher's ability to transport them back to the ancient situation, but effective exposition does not leave the Christian wondering what the text might mean in his daily life today.

The Process of Principlization

Principlization is the key to application. Kaiser defined principliza-tion as the ability "to state the author's propositions, arguments, narra-tions, and illustrations in timeless abiding truths with special focus on the application of those truths to the current needs of the Church."[27] Sometimes the prophet will principlize his own material. Isaiah 7:9 of-fers us an example of the prophet explicitly stating the principle he wanted Ahaz to understand. More often the interpreter must do his own principlization by analyzing material that deals with the Mosaic law and cultural elements that are very much different from the modern, occi-dental world. The crucial question to answer is how the results of exeget-ical study can be stated succinctly in timeless language that applies directly to the modern person. The interpreter must guard against trying to rush this process. He must not invest so much of his time in the ex-egetical phase of his study that application becomes hurried and haphaz-ard.

Kinds of Prophetic Fulfillment

An important consideration in the application of prophecy concerns the type of fulfillment the text demands. There are three main kinds of fulfillment. (1) Some predictions require direct fulfillment at only one point in the future. This article has argued that Isaiah 7:14 is direct prophecy. Only the pregnancy of the virgin Mary and the birth of Christ could fulfill the stated predictions. Application of direct prophecy involves a statement of the significance of the fulfillment for the Christian. (2) Other prophetic texts indicate that a pattern of fulfillment may occur at various times in human history before the ultimate con-summation of the prediction occurs. An example of this kind is the pre-diction of Joel 2:28–32. On the day of Pentecost, God used the pattern of this prediction to give His people a preview of the eschatological events that will fulfill the prophecy (see Acts 2:16–21). The events at Pentecost that fit the pattern included the pouring out of the Holy Spirit, men prophesying, and people calling on the name of the Lord for salvation. The experience at Pentecost could not have been the fulfill-ment of the prophecy because of several things that did not take place: the Spirit was not poured out on *all* flesh, there were no celestial signs

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[27] *Toward An Exegetical Theology,* p. 152.

such as the sun being darkened, and there were no women involved in the prophesying. The sovereign God who superintends all of human history gives a preview of the ultimate fulfillment of a prophecy to remind believers that He is in control of human events. The expositor can make legitimate application of prophecy in this category when objective correspondence exists between the prediction and modern circumstances. (3) The last kind of fulfillment is sequential. This category involves a prediction containing elements that are fulfilled at different times in history, although the elements are joined together in a chronologically seamless appearance. Probably the best example is Isaiah 61:1–2. Verses 1–2a were completed during Christ's earthly ministry, but "the day of vengeance of our God" will come to pass during the Tribulation. The application of sequential fulfillment must take into account the complementary aspects of the various stages in the sequence of completion. Isaiah 61:1–2, for instance, shows the two aspects of God's plan for the rest of history: the Lord currently promises that He will graciously allow Himself to be found by the repentant sinner, but the day of grace will come to a close as God's outpoured wrath sweeps over the world.

As mentioned above, the application of prophecy that is fulfilled by one specific historic event involves identifying the principle that applies to the modern Christian. In the example of Isaiah 7, Ahaz faced a crisis situation that threatened his very existence. God offered him assurance through Isaiah's prophecy that the danger posed by the northern kings would come to nothing. Ahaz needed only to place his confidence in the Word of God. As Ahaz balked at exhibiting faith, God offered him a sign to persuade him. The king refused the sign and trusted his own cleverness to engineer his own deliverance. After Ahaz's steadfast refusal to trust God, Isaiah 7:14 was given as a sign for all time that God is able to deliver. Ahaz faced a human enemy, but man's ultimate foe is sin. It is from the ultimate danger of eternal perdition that God desires to save those who trust Him. Notice the way the New Testament writer combined these same aspects of deliverance from sin and the virgin birth of Christ:

> But while he thought on these things, behold, the angel of the Lord appeared unto him in a dream, saying, Joseph, thou son of David, fear not to take unto thee Mary thy wife: for that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Ghost. And she shall bring forth a son, and thou shalt call his name JESUS: *for he shall save his people from their sins.* Now all this was done, that it might be fulfilled which was spoken of the Lord by the prophet, saying, Behold, a virgin shall be with child, and shall bring forth a son, and they shall call his name Emmanuel, which being interpreted is, God with us (Matt 1:20–23, italics added).

The virgin birth of Christ was God's miraculous sign intended to persuade men that He has the power to rescue all who place their faith

in Him. There are only two types of people in the world: those who are proudly attempting to impress God with their own efforts to appear righteous before Him, and those who have renounced all attempts at self-justification by humbly trusting in the Lord for salvation. The over-all message of the book of Isaiah is that the Holy One of Israel judges proud individuals, but He saves those who humbly place their faith in Him. The ultimate application of any prophetic text is to draw men's eyes to the matchless holiness of God and to call for conformity to His image.

CONCLUSION

This article has shown how the normal rules of grammatical-historical exegesis apply to prophetic portions of the Old Testament. By using the seventh chapter of Isaiah as a testing ground for interpretational methodology, actual examples of the process of interpretation have served as illustrations of the expositor's task in study. Fundamental pastors need to feed, challenge, exhort, encourage, and even rebuke their people from the prophetic portions of Scripture. Many of the historic situations the Old Testament prophets faced have direct correspondence with modern American society. Just as the prophets dealt with materialistic idolatry, immorality, violence, and injustice, so today's pastor must proclaim, "thus saith the Lord," as he preaches on these same sins. Within Bible-believing Christianity as a whole, the pulpits of America have become known more for seminars on a man-centered plan for successful living than as a place where God's spokesman proclaims the glorious will of the universal Sovereign. Perhaps this generation will witness an earnest return to the exposition of the Old Testament prophets.