

Preface

INTERPRETING THE PROPHETS

Lord Bishop of Liverpool
Late Right Rev. J. C. Ryle (19th Century)
(talking to his own fellow churchmen)

I believe it is high time for the Church of Christ to awaken out of its sleep about Old Testament prophecy. I think we have made great mistakes, and it is high time that we should confess it!

I warn you that unless you interpret the prophetic portion of the Old Testament in the simple, literal meaning of its words, you will find it no easy matter to carry on an argument with an unconverted Jew. Will you dare to tell him that Zion, Jerusalem, Jacob, Judah, Ephraim, Israel, do not mean what they seem to mean, but mean the Church of Christ?

[Oh, reader! If you are a man of this mind, take care what you are doing! I say again, take care! I think we should remember that we must reject Protestant traditions which are not according to the Bible, as much as the traditions of the Church of Rome.]

I believe it is high time for the Church of Christ to awaken out of its sleep about Old Testament prophecy. From the time of the Old Fathers Jerome and Origen down to the present day men have gone on in a pernicious habit of spiritualising the words of the prophets until their true meaning has been well nigh buried. It is high time to lay aside the traditional methods of interpretation and to give up our blind obedience to the opinions of such writers as Pool, Henry, Scott and Clark, upon unfulfilled prophecy.

It is high time to fall back on the good old principle that Scripture generally means what it seems to mean, and to

beware of that semi-sceptical argument: "*Such and such an interpretation cannot be correct, because it seems to us carnal.*" It is high time for Christians to interpret unfulfilled prophecy by the light of prophecy already fulfilled.

The curses on the Jews were brought to pass literally; so also will be the blessings. The scattering was literal; so also will be the gathering. The pulling down of Zion was literal; so also will be the building up. The rejection of Israel was literal; so also will be the restoration.

It is high time to cease from explaining the Old Testament prophecies in away not warranted by the New Testament. What right have we to say that the words Judah, Zion, Israel, and Jerusalem ever mean anything but literal Judah, literal Zion, literal Israel, and literal Jerusalem? What precedent shall we find in the New Testament? Hardly any, if, indeed, any at all.

I can only discover three senses in which the word Israel is used: First, it is one of the names of Jacob; Second, a name given to the Ten Tribes which separated from Judah and Benjamin and became a distinct Kingdom, often called Israel in contradistinction to the Kingdom of Judah; Third, the name given to the whole Jewish (sic) or Twelve-Tribed nation.

For centuries there has prevailed in the churches of Christ an unwarrantable mode of dealing with the word 'Israel'; it has been interpreted in many passages of the Psalms and

Prophets as if it meant nothing more than Christian believers. Have promises been held out to Israel? Men have been told continually that they are addressed to Gentile saints. Have glorious things been described as laid up in store for Israel? Men have been incessantly told that they describe the victories and triumphs of the Gospel in Christian churches. The proofs of these things are too many to require quotation.

Against that system I have long protested, and I hope I shall always protest as long as I live . . . What I protest against is the habit of allegorising plain sayings of the Word of God concerning the future history of the Nation Israel, and explaining away the fullness of their contents in order to accommodate them to the Gentile church. I believe the habit to be unwarranted by anything in Scripture and to draw after it a long train of evil consequences.

Where in the whole New Testament, shall we find any plain authority for applying the word Israel to anyone but the nation Israel? I can find none.

We are often told in the New Testament that under the Gospel, believing Gentiles are 'fellow-heirs and partakers of the same hope' with believing Jews (Eph. 3:6), but that believing Gentiles may be called 'Israel' I cannot see anywhere at all.

To what may be attributed that loose system of interpreting the language of the Psalms and Prophets? To nothing so much, I believe, as the habit of inaccurately interpreting the word Israel and the consequent application of the promises to the Gentile churches, with which they have nothing to do.

Beware of that system of allegorising and spiritualising and accommodating, which the School of Origen first brought in and found such an unfortunate degree of favour in the Church.

In reading the words which God addressed to His Ancient People, never lose sight of the primary sense of the text.

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