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THE PRINCIPLE OF DOUBLE FULFILLMENT IN INTERPRETING PROPHECY

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The controversy over the principle of "double-fulfillment" in the interpretation of prophecy is not a new theological development. As far back as Theodore of Mopsuestia, there were conflicting opinions as to the validity of applying one prophetic passage to more than one situation. Theodore (350-428 A.D.), who was labeled "The Exegete" by his contemporaries, refused to accept any prophetic interpretation that approached duplicity.

In Frederick Farrar's History of Interpretation, Theodore of Mopsuestia is mentioned in connection with Zechariah 9:8-10. Farrar says:

In the ninth chapter of Zechariah, Theodore thought it an instance of frigid and foolish interpretation to apply one clause historically and another allegorically, to refer one to Zerubbabel, the next to Christ, and then to go back again to Zerubbabel. He refuses to read the latest revelations into the earliest utterances¹

Time has not solved the problem. Today there are good men on both sides of the debate. Perhaps Dwight Pentecost has stated the case in favor of the "double-sense" principle better than any other:

Few laws are more important to observe in the interpretation of prophetic Scriptures than the law of double

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reference. Two events, widely separated as to the time of their fulfillment, may be brought together into the scope of prophecy.²

Other men who have agreed with Pentecost as to the legitimacy of this principle are: Berkeley Mickelsen, Bernard Ramm, C. L. Feinberg, Charles Ryrie, and John Walvoord.

The other side of the issue is championed by Milton S. Terry. He has devoted several pages in his book on Hermeneutics to the objections which he has to the "law of double reference." Some of these objections will be answered later, but perhaps this statement by Terry will open the door to debate:

. . . the moment we admit the principle that portions of Scripture contain an occult or double sense, we introduce an element of uncertainty in the Sacred Volume, and unsettle all scientific interpretation.³

Terry also quotes Owen and Ryle, in that order: "If Scripture has more than one meaning, it has no meaning at all."⁴ "I hold that the words of Scripture were intended to have one definite sense and that our first objective should be to discover that sense, and adhere rigidly to it."

Obviously this article will not settle a question that has been the source of heated battle for many years. It is the writer's objective to clarify the terminology used and the issues involved. For some this may add fuel to the fire of disagreement. If we can understand the basis of our agreement or disagreement, we will have accomplished our objective. For this reason, the first part of the study will be taken up with the setting forth of some definitions and distinctions.

The second part will try to answer the question, "Why the double-reference principle?" By this time we hope to have answered some of the objections to this principle of interpretation, and to have prepared the way for an examination of the passages of Scripture which contain the double references.

This is an important question because: (1) It involves a great number of Old Testament passages. (2) It is one of the bones of contention between Premillennialists and Amillennialists. (3) It is misunderstood by many who would fight for its validity. (4) It is an often-mentioned, but little-defined principle. (5) It involves, if carefully understood, a proof for, not against, the literal interpretation of the Scriptures.

WHAT IS THE LAW OF DOUBLE REFERENCE?

Definitions

The following definitions have been given by various authors and theologians:

J. Edwin Hartell defines double reference as:

. . . the peculiarity of the writings of the Holy Spirit, by which a passage applying primarily to a person or event near at hand is used by him at a later time as applying to the person of Christ, or the affairs of His kingdom.⁵

A. H. Strong puts it this way:

Certain prophecies apparently contain a fulness of meaning which is not exhausted by the event to which they most obviously and literally refer. A prophecy which had a partial fulfillment at a time not remote from its utterance, may find its chief fulfillment in an event far distant. Since the principles of God's administration find ever recurring and enlarging illustration in history, prophecies which have already had a partial fulfillment may have whole cycles of fulfillment yet before them.⁶

Another standard definition is from the pen of Thomas Hartwell Horne:

The same prophecies frequently have a double meaning, and refer to different events, the one near, the other remote; the one temporal, the other spiritual or perhaps eternal. The prophets thus having several events in view, their expressions may be partly applicable to one and partly to another, and it is not always easy to make the transitions. What has not been fulfilled in the first, we must apply to the second; and what has already been fulfilled, may often be considered as typical of what remains to be accomplished.⁸

Charles Feinberg points out that the law of double reference,

. . . may assume any one of several forms. Two or more events of a like character may be described by a common profile. . . . Future events placed side by

side in the prophecy, may have great gaps between them in their fulfillment.⁸

Charles Ryrie has taken the liberty of separating the two aspects of this one law into two distinct laws. The one he calls The Law of Double Reference, and the other he has named The Law of Time Reference.⁹

It is much easier to separate these two laws in a theology book than it is in the Scripture. Whenever one finds the first part in operation, he is almost sure to find the second. For that reason it seems best to consider them together.

From the definitions and statements of the above-mentioned theologians, we may make the following observations:

1. In double reference prophecy, the first fulfillment of the prophecy usually is found in a person or event close in time to the prophetic utterance.

2. In double reference prophecy, the first fulfillment is usually only a partial fulfillment of the total prophetic message.

3. In double reference prophecy, the ultimate fulfillment is usually found in the person of Christ or the affairs of His kingdom.

Double fulfillment is particularly true of the predictions . . . concerning the Babylonian Captivity, the event of the day of the Lord, the return from Babylon, the world-wide dispersion of Israel, and their future re-gathering from all the corners of the earth . . .¹⁰

4. In double reference prophecy, the first fulfillment is usually temporal, whereas, the ultimate fulfillment may be spiritual or eternal.

5. In double reference prophecy, part of the prophetic message may be fulfilled close at hand, and that fulfillment in turn becomes another prophecy. A. J. Gordon says, "Prophecy has no sooner become history, than history in turn becomes prophecy."¹¹

6. In double reference prophecy, two or more prophecies may be grouped together in one area of vision, although they are really at different distances in fulfillment.

7. In double reference prophecy, observations 5 and 6 are usually found to be working in the same passage.

There are many other terms beside "double reference" which are used by various writers and theologians to describe what has been set forth in the seven observations we have just discussed. In most cases, the following terms are used interchangeably with "double reference" and may be understood to stand for any or all of the parts of the law: Near and Far View, Double Sense, Multiple Fulfillment, Gap Prophecy, Foreshortening, and several others.

There are two terms which need special mention here. "Compenetration" is a term used by Catholic writers to define what they understand by this law of double reference. "In an Old Testament passage, the near meaning and the remote meaning for the New Testament so compenetrates that the passage at the same time and in the same word refers to the near and the remote New Testament meaning."¹²

The other term comes from the writing of Beecher. It seems to stand for the second aspect of double reference prophecy, the "time-reference" application. Beecher used the term "Generic Prophecy" in this way:

A generic prophecy is one which regards an event as occurring in a series of parts separated by intervals, and expresses itself in language that may apply indifferently to the nearest part, or to the remoter parts, or to the whole--in other words, a prediction which, in applying to the whole of a complex event, also applies to some of the parts.¹³

The one fact that is obvious as one studies the material available on this subject is that each writer seems to have his own idea as to the meaning of this law of interpretation. It is because of this wide variety of understandings that so many have rejected the right and legitimate use of a principle which is necessary to the proper exposition of prophetic Scripture.

Distinctions

Distinguish Between the Early and Later Meaning of "Double Reference"

The law of double reference seems to have undergone somewhat of an evolution since its early mention. Early expositors seemed to have held that "double fulfillment" was one literal fulfillment in the immediate context of the prophecy, and a second or multiple fulfillments which were not literal, but were referred to as allegorical or mystical fulfillments.

T. H. Horne's comment on Hosea 11:1 will serve to illustrate:

This passage in its literal sense, was meant of God's delivering the children of Israel out of Egypt; but in its secondary and mystical sense, there can be no doubt that an allusion was intended by the Holy Spirit to the call of the infant Christ out of the same country.¹⁴

Today's writers would not express themselves this way. A double fulfillment prophecy loses not one bit of its literalness when it is fulfilled the second or third time. This would violate our basic system of hermeneutics. "Double fulfillment is literal fulfillment and therefore consistent with basic rules of interpretation."¹⁵

Distinguish Between Interpretation and Application

The law of double reference is not the Pandora's Box of Biblical Hermeneutics as some opponents would claim. It is the failure of many to distinguish application from interpretation that has caused such an accusation to be leveled at the principle. To accept the law of double reference as a legitimate tool for interpretation of prophecy is not to open the door to all kinds of fanciful notions as to the hidden and allegorical meanings that might be alluded to in a prophetic passage.

To speak of the law of double reference is to speak of interpretation, not application. Double reference is not one interpretation and manifold applications. It is one message for two audiences separated in time.¹⁶

Ryrie's example is sufficient to show why we must be careful to make this difference:

Psalm 122:6, may well be used as an example of the proper distinction between interpretation and application. The verse reads: 'Pray for the peace of Jerusalem: they shall prosper that love thee.' The literal interpreter understands this verse in a twofold sense: (1) The primary reference is to the city of Jerusalem, and that for which it, as the capital, stands representative, that is, the nation Israel and the land. (2) There is also a secondary application, but not an interpretation, allowed, that is, an expression of the general truth that in all generations divine blessing has rested upon all who forwarded the work of those identified with the Lord. The application, however,

does not in any way take the place of the interpretation . . . 17

If the above example would have had reference secondarily to a specific event or person, it would have been within the boundaries of the double reference principle. It does not, however, so it is one statement with unlimited applications, not one prophecy with two literal fulfillments.

Distinguish between Reference and Fulfillment

Some writers are very careful to make it known that double reference is unacceptable to them, but that double fulfillment is a valid principle. This seems to be more a matter of semantics than anything else, but a word of explanation might help. The reason that some enemies of this law reject its use is that they just cannot accept the idea that the Holy Spirit had more than one intention when the prophetic message was given. They will concede however, that once the message was given, it could have found fulfillments outside the original scope of the prophecy. It is for this reason that they prefer fulfillment over reference or sense.

This distinction has not been followed in writing this paper. It seems to this writer that if the difference is made for the reason given above, we are left with the horrid thought that the Holy Spirit Himself is surprised with the ultimate fulfillment of His original prophecy.

WHY DOUBLE REFERENCE IN PROPHECY?

Why, in studying the Scriptures, should we expect to find some prophecies that are fulfilled more than once? Is it the purpose of the Almighty to confuse His people by making the understanding of His Revelation difficult? Certainly not! It is His desire that all who read might understand. It is also true, however, that there were humans involved in the writing of the Scripture, and our doctrine of inspiration holds that God used their personalities so that they were not simply secretaries taking down dictation. If we are to understand the writings of these men, we must understand not only the men themselves, but also the circumstances that surrounded their predictive statements, and the nature of Old Testament prophecy as well. In other words, we must be careful not to read into prophecy, especially Old Testament prophecy, all of the characteristics of prophetic revelation which we now understand because of the fuller message of the New Testament.

Why is the double reference principle part of the Word of God? These reasons seem to stand out:

Because of the Unchronological Character of the Old Testament Prophecy

Not a few writers have observed this phenomenon. Raud says:

God uses spiritual order in writing prophecy
 For example, the second chapter of Isaiah may be divided into three sections. (1) The vision of the Gentile nations flocking to Jerusalem when Christ reigns there, to worship Him and learn His laws. (vv 2-4) (2) A rebuke to idolatrous Israel. (5-11) (3) A warning of judgment upon all pride and idolatry in the Day of the Lord. (12-22)

If we should arrange this chapter to suit the time order of its fulfillment we should have (2), (3), and (1). But then we would lose the force of the rebuke which the Lord administered to His wayward nation by, (1) Pointing to the future submission of the Gentiles to Him, (2) Denouncing the Jews idolatry, and (3) Warning the Jews that His judgment is certain and final.¹⁸

Feinberg quotes Kellogg:

. . . because two events are spoken of together or in close sequence, is no proof that these events will take place simultaneously or even in immediate succession, unless the Scripture specifically affirms so.¹⁹

Stanley Leathes agrees:

. . . needless to say, it is contrary to the analysis of the prophetic Scriptures to suppose that because events are mentioned in immediate juxtaposition that they must certainly come to pass in immediate chronological order.²⁰

The fact that the prophet was both a foreteller and a forthteller is significant here. Unlike many of our ideas of prophecy, the most important aspect of the prophecy to the prophet was the immediate not the future. He was interested in his generation and hoped, by the prediction of things to come, to cause them to repent and return to the God who was able to do such tremendous things as the prophet foretold. One should not be surprised to find two widely separated events referred to in the same chapter or verse, for the Holy Spirit enabled the prophet to bring these events together because they had a special meaning to his own situation.

This is much like the character of the New Testament Gospels. As the predictive history of the Old Testament is often given according to moral or spiritual order, so the actual history of the Gospels:

We have every reason to believe that where there is a difference of order in the presentation of events in the Gospels, it is because moral and spiritual considerations are given precedence over the chronological.²¹

One illustration of this is the Sermon on the Mount, which is given by Matthew as one connected discourse, but in Luke is found in about twenty different places.

Because of the Limited Perspective of the Prophet

"In dealing with the predictive aspect of prophecy, we must remember that when God spoke to and through His servants, He did not give them unlimited vision. Instead they were confined within a divinely limited perspective."²²

A. H. Strong has given several illustrations of this principle from various avenues of life. Perhaps he goes a little overboard with his word pictures, but all have helped in the explanation of this rule to others. They are simply listed here without his replete explanations:

- * As in Japanese pictures, the near and the far appear equally distant.
- * As in dissolving views, the ultimate and immediate future melts into a future immeasurably far away.
- * The candle that shines through a narrow aperture sends out its light through an ever-increasing area.
- * Sections of a triangle correspond to one another, but the more distant are far greater than the near.
- * The chalet on the mountainside may turn out to be only a black cat on the woodpile, or a speck upon the window pane.
- * A hill which is seen to rise close behind another is found on nearer approach to have receded a great way from it.
- * The painter by foreshortening, brings together things or parts that are relatively distant from each other.²³

Alva J. McClain refers to the limited perspective of the prophet Daniel as he prophesied the seventy weeks determined upon the nation of Israel:

. . . he saw events together on the screen of prophecy which in their fulfillment were separated by centuries of time. This curious characteristic, so strange to Western minds, was in complete harmony with the Oriental mind, which was little concerned with a continuous chronology . . . the Oriental was interested in the next important event, not in the time that might intervene. The Bible is an Oriental book, humanly speaking.²⁴

There is an interesting verse of Scripture in I Peter which seems to shed light on this from the prophets' viewpoint. Peter tells us that after the prophets had written, they actually sat down and tried to figure out the time element involved in their own prophecies:

Searching what, or what manner, of time the Spirit of Christ who was in them did signify, when he testified beforehand the sufferings of Christ, and the glory that should follow. (I Peter 1:11)

If the prophets could not understand the time element in their prophetic messages, it is proper and true to say that their perspective was limited. This does not in any way detract from the truth of their statements, since no one would insist that a statement be understood in order that it be true, literally true.

Because of the Christological Orientation of the Scriptures

Another reason for expecting double reference in prophecy concerns the Christological orientation of the entire Word of God. When Christ was speaking to the two disciples on the road to Emmaus, He instructed them concerning Himself, and His text was the writings of Moses, and all the prophets.²⁵ Later on in the same chapter we read;

These are the words which I spake unto you while I was yet with you, that all things must be fulfilled, which were written in the law of Moses, and in the prophets, and in the psalms concerning me.²⁶

According to Christ's own words, the message of the Old Testament was the coming Messiah. We should not be surprised then to discover that the prophets looked first at their own situation, but ultimately at the coming Messiah. (We have already observed that double

reference prophecy is usually fulfilled ultimately in the person of Christ or the affairs of His kingdom.)

Because of the Necessity of Future Assurance

Yet another provision was made to confirm men's faith in utterances which had regard to the far future. It frequently happened that prophets who had to speak of such things were also commissioned to predict other things which would shortly come to pass; and the verification of these latter predictions in their own day and generation justified men in believing the other utterances which pointed to a more distant time. The one practically a 'sign' of the other, and if the one proved true, the other might be trusted.²⁷

Perhaps one of the best illustrations of this dimension in double reference prophecy is found in Gabriel's words to Mary recorded in Luke 1:30-33. Gabriel told Mary the following things:

1. She was to conceive in her womb and bring forth a son.
2. She was to call his name Jesus.
3. He was to be great.
4. He was to be called the Son of the Highest.
5. The Lord was to give unto him the throne of his father David.
6. He was to reign over the house of Jacob forever.
7. And of his kingdom there was to be no end.²⁸

The first four parts of this prophecy were fulfilled literally in the earthly ministry of Jesus Christ. There is no way, however, that the last three parts can be said to have been fulfilled. They are yet future. They will yet be fulfilled in Christ. Feinberg's words are pertinent:

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?²⁹

WHERE IS DOUBLE FULFILLMENT FOUND?

Not one passage was examined under this title that did not have a dispute connected with it. To examine every passage that might

possibly contain double reference prophecy would exceed the limitations of space imposed upon this paper. The passages of Scripture that have been listed on the charts which follow have been used because they represent the different aspects of this principle, and also because they represent the different types of prophecy.

Certain general rules seem to suggest themselves to one who has studied the literature available on this subject. How can you tell if a prophetic statement has more than one fulfillment? These suggestions may help:

1. Determine if the prophecy has been fulfilled in its literal and complete meaning. Elsa Raud makes the following comment:

We can know whether or not the law of double reference applies to the prophecy we are reading by ascertaining whether it has been fulfilled completely and literally. Genesis 12:3 says that "in thee shall all families of the earth be blessed." All the families of the earth have not yet experienced the blessing in Christ which the promise declares Only a comparatively few Jews and Gentiles have thus been blessed in Him. The prophecy in Genesis 12:3 will be fulfilled for all the families of the earth in the Day of the Lord.³⁰

2. If the prophecy seems to have a double or wider meaning, examine that meaning only after you have carefully worked out the primary interpretation of the prophecy. What you understand by the first fulfillment will color your understanding of the second or ultimate fulfillment.

3. Look for some interpretive comment from the New Testament writers to aid your interpretation of the secondary or ultimate meaning.

4. If the understanding you get from the ultimate fulfillment is not completely in accord with that which is directly revealed concerning the person or event, reject it. Start over! In no case does our knowledge of a future event or person depend solely on the information contained in a double reference prophecy.

PROPHECY

Hosea 11:1, "When Israel was a child, then I loved him, and called my son out of Egypt.

Joel 2:28-32 ". . . I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh . . . prophesy . . . dreams . . . visions wonders in heaven and earth . . . blood . . . fire . . . smoke . . . sun turned into darkness . . . moon into blood.

Psalms 118:22, "The stone which the builders refused is become the head of the corner."

Isaiah 41:8 - 53, The predictions in this section of Scripture with regard to the Servant of Jehovah, make a gradual transition from Israel to the Messiah. Israel alone is seen in 41:8, but she sinks completely out of sight in chapter 53.

FIRST FULFILLMENT

Reference to the exodus of the children of Israel out of the land of Egypt.

Peter quoted this entire passage in Acts 2:17:21 and used it to answer the question concerning Pentecost. "This is that which was spoken of through the prophet Joel."

Primarily referred to the Jewish nation, conquered, carried away, and cast aside as of no use, but destined to a future of importance. Matthew 21:42, Acts 4:2

Israel

SECOND OR ULTIMATE FULFILLMENT

Reference to the love of God in calling His Son back from the comparative safety of Egypt in order that He might die for His people. Matt. 2:15 "That it might be fulfilled which was spoken by Lord through the prophet saying, "Out of Egypt have I called my son."

The last part of this prophecy was not fulfilled at Pentecost. It remains to be fulfilled in the tribulation period. Rev. 6:12 "and the sun became black as sackcloth of hair, and the moon became like blood."

The prophecy is quoted in I Peter 2:7 "unto you therefore who believe, he is precious, but unto them who are disobedient, He, (Christ) the stone which the builders disallowed, the same is made the head of the corner. . . ."

Messiah - I Peter 2:2-25

PROPHECY

Luke 1:30-33. Gabriel's prophecy to Mary concerning the coming of Christ.

Daniel 11:21-12:3. This section of Scripture dealing mainly with the prophecy of Antiochus Epiphanes also points to an event in the far future.

Daniel 11:31. A specific prophecy. "And forces shall stand on his part and they shall pollute the sanctuary of strength, and shall take away the daily sacrifice, and shall place the abomination that maketh desolate."

Daniel 12:2. "Many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt."

Deuteronomy 18:15. "The Lord thy God will raise up unto thee a prophet from the midst of thee, of thy brethren, like unto me, unto him ye shall hearken."

FIRST FULFILLMENT

Partially fulfilled at the first coming of Christ to this earth.

I Maccabees, chapter one, gives details of Antiochus Epiphanes' reign of terror.

I Maccabees 1:54 (referring to the army of Antiochus Epiphanes "now on the fifteenth day of Chisleu, in the one hundred and forty-fifth year, they erected a desolating sacrilege upon the altar of burnt offering."

The first part of this verse is fulfilled after the tribulation and before the millennium.

This is a reference to the one who was to succeed Moses as leader, namely Joshua. From the context, it could also refer to the prophetic line that would follow.

SECOND OR ULTIMATE FULFILLMENT

Ultimately fulfilled in the second coming of Christ. (See earlier discussion)

Revelation 13:1-10 - Ultimately these prophecies will be fulfilled in the person and ministry of the beast, the Head of the ten-kingdom federation of Gentiles.

Matthew 24:15 - referring to the middle of the tribulation period, or the middle of Daniel's seventieth week. "When ye therefore shall see the abomination of desolation spoken of by Daniel the prophet, stand in the holy place . . ."

The second part is fulfilled 1000 years later, at the close of the thousand year reign of Christ. (A good illustration of a large gap of time within the period of one verse.)

Acts 3:22-26 - "For Moses truly said, a prophet shall the Lord raise up unto you . . . Ye are the children of the prophets . . . unto you first God . . . raised up his Son Jesus . . ."

PROPHECY

FIRST FULFILLMENT

SECOND OR ULTIMATE FULFILLMENT

Isaiah 61:1-2. Here both advents of Christ are seen in one view, They are found in the two statements, "The acceptable year of the Lord," and, "The day of vengeance of our God."

Luke 4:16-20. When our Lord read from Isaiah the prophet in Nazareth, He read the entire prophecy up to the end of that which dealt with his first coming, v.19 "To preach the acceptable year of the Lord. . . And he closed the book." This part was being fulfilled before their eyes.

The day of vengeance will be fulfilled when the Lord returns the second time to this earth.

Isaiah 10:17 - 34 - Prophecy relating to the king of Assyria.

Fulfilled partially in the historical king of Assyria.

Fulfilled ultimately, especially from verse 20 on, in the eschatological king of Assyria.

THERE ARE MANY OTHER PASSAGES WHICH SOME SCHOLARS WOULD PLACE IN THIS CATEGORY. THOUGH ALL OF THE ABOVE CITED PASSAGES, COULD BE DISPUTED BY SOME, THE OTHER REFERENCES LISTED BELOW, SEEM MUCH TOO DOUBTFUL TO PLACE ARBITRARILY IN THAT CATEGORY.

- Isaiah 7:14 - Christ & Mahershalalhashbaz
- Isaiah 14 - King of Babylon & Satan
- II Samuel 7:12-16 - David & Christ
- Isaiah 9:6 - Historical & Eschatological
- Micah 5:2 - Historical & Eschatological

Many of the Messianic Psalms would have to be proven to have had an historical fulfillment before they could be considered in the double reference category.

Conclusion

The Bible does contain some prophecies that are fulfilled in more than one situation. Eventually every Bible student says that, though he may not say it in those words. When we understand the reasons for our discovery of double reference prophecies, we will not be so concerned about what to call them, as we are about how to apply them. Since the Bible is a miraculous book, we may expect to find some miraculous things in it. Double reference prophecy is one of God's miracles.

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