

The Certainty of Prophetic Language

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Introduction

Robert Daly, the Anglican rector of Powerscourt (1814-42) who was known in his day as the “Protestant Pope of Ireland,” moderated the first two of the famous Powerscourt Conferences held in the early 1830s. The transcription of one of his lengthy comments to the gathered group in light of what he had heard contains the following interesting section:

Our trumpet should not give ‘an uncertain sound;’ we are not to say one day what we may have to contradict the next; we are not to preach this Sunday, that not one of the vials of God’s wrath has been yet poured out, and to ask some one of our beloved brethren here, to tell our congregation the following Sunday, that six of these vials have been poured out. This, surely, would not teach anyone their duty to God; it might even have the effect of making the ungodly among our people say, what the Roman Catholics falsely assert, that Scripture is uncertain.¹

Daly was interested in the study of prophecy but wanted people to be cautious and not overstate their conclusions with a certainty that went beyond the text. His particular example about the vials spoke more to the interpretation of the Revelation texts in question than to the identification of their fulfillment in events of history, which is sometimes another matter. In general, Daly believed in the certainty of Scripture. This can be seen clearly in his criticism of Edward Irving’s teaching that the sign gifts such as tongue-speaking and prophetic utterance were still operating in the present age.² For Daly, Irving was certainly wrong. However, in prophecy the rector of Powerscourt thought the connecting of all of the details led to some measure of uncertainty so that there should be no dogmatism.

Is Daly’s point well-taken for our day? In an age where sensationalism in prophecy abounds on all sides, a note of caution is not out of bounds. Many theological deductions are made which are not rooted firmly in textual exposition. Concepts like the day of the Lord are wrongfully converted into technical terms which mean the same thing everywhere they occur in the Bible. Current events trump the inerrant Word as prior views or even wishes about fulfillment go looking for texts to rest upon. All these things the interpreter should reject in the strongest way.

However, such a cautious tact does not mean that prophecy cannot be understood, although for many the trend is in a different direction. At the present time, there is within professing evangelicalism a tendency that suggests that emphasizing eschatological details is not

¹ *Personal Recollections of the Right Reverend Robert Daly, Late Bishop of Cashel, At Powerscourt and Waterford by an Old Parishioner* (Dublin: George Herbert, 1872; reprint ed., Whitefish, MT: Kessinger Publishing, 2010), 21-22. Kessinger Publishing provides rare reprints of antiquarian documents. See www.kessinger.net.

² *Ibid.*, 19-20. Burnham believes that Daly’s closing statement to the 1832 conference was a criticism aimed chiefly at Darby (Jonathan D. Burnham, *A Story of Conflict: The Controversial Relationship between Benjamin Wills Newton and John Nelson Darby* [Carlisle, UK: Paternoster Press, 2004], 120-21). Daly never left the Anglican Church and advanced later to the position of bishop. Darby used Powerscourt to advance the thought that the Anglican Church was in ruins and had to be abandoned. Apparently, throughout the conference Daly, as moderator, would take his stand on the various issues presented to the attendees.

warranted in many of the texts that have traditionally been understood as referring to the eschaton. One particular example reflecting this trend would be Sandy's statement:

Despite the freedom of prophets to speak in colorful ways, understanding their message is not difficult—insofar as we stand back and take in the big picture. The prophets were announcing that God's patience with the chosen people's covenant lawlessness was close to reaching the breaking point, and he was going to pour out his anger in terrifying ways, unless the people repented and returned to the covenant relationship. In which case, God would pour out blessing in unimaginable ways. Our understanding of the specifics of the prophetic message, however, is not as clear. We may not know in some instances what is literal and what is figurative, what is conditional and what is unconditional, what was fulfilled in the prophets' own time, what was fulfilled in the life of Jesus and the early church, what has yet future fulfillment, or in many cases, what had a trajectory of fulfillment, spanning all three.³

Notice that Sandy teaches that the overall message of the prophets is clear but that the prophetic details are often not clear. Sandy is not just saying that it takes more study to align all of the particulars of prophecy so we can understand them. What is actually being suggested is that the nature of prophetic language lends itself at times to uncertainty at the level of details. Such an interpretive bent leads to drastically different conclusions about eschatological passages. So the question that must be asked and answered is, "How certain are prophetic texts?"

At the outset, the specter of postmodernism appears to be in the air. The uncertainty of all language is one of the cherished and celebrated notions of the postmodern mindset. Much written material exists in this area and will not be rehashed here other than to recall that the idea that language itself is a social construction rather than divinely designed has been debunked rather strongly.⁴ One might be tempted to see the question of prophetic certainty as simply an application of the postmodern spirit to texts given by the prophets. This is probably a valid concern. Prophetic details will have less and less significance where postmodern thought takes hold. Seen in this light, discussions such as Hart's "Imagination and Responsible Reading"⁵ cause consternation in those of us who are resisting the postmodern impulse. However, the

³ D. Brent Sandy, "Plowshares and Pruning Hooks and the Hermeneutics of Dispensationalism" (San Diego: Dispensational Study Group at the Annual Meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society, 2007), 13. Sandy has given permission to post his paper together with my response at my personal website; see Mike Stallard, "Response to D. Brent Sandy's Paper: 'Plowshares and Pruning Hooks and the Hermeneutics of Dispensationalism'" (<http://faculty.bbc.edu/mstallard/biblical-studies/systematic-theology/eschatology/>). This paper is actually a modification and expansion of my response to Sandy. A revised version of this paper or an entirely new follow-up article is planned to be delivered at the Pre-Trib Study Group in December 2010.

⁴ For example, see the two articles by Charles A. Clough, "Interpreting Texts on End-Time Geophysical Catastrophes" (Dallas, TX: Papers Presented at the Pre-Trib Study Group, 2008 & 2009).

⁵ Trevor Hart, "Imagination and Responsible Reading" in *Renewing Biblical Interpretation*, Scripture and Hermeneutics Series, Vol. 1, edited by Craig Bartholomew, Colin Greene, and Karl Möller (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000), 307-34. Conservatives are not the only ones wrestling with such issues. A similar debate exists in post-liberal and post-conservative circles as the attempt is made to evaluate higher critical approaches to prophetic texts in light of recent developments. See Karl Möller, "Renewing Historical Criticism" in *Renewing Biblical Interpretation*, Scripture and Hermeneutics Series, Vol. 1, edited by Craig Bartholomew, Colin Greene, and Karl Möller (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000), 145-71.

downplaying of prophetic details has been going on much longer than the recent rise of postmodernism as the earlier example of Daly shows. Regardless of the motivation that is encountered for declaring uncertainty, the study of the certainty of prophetic language is needed in our day.

A Test Case: Is There Eschatology in the Book of Joel?

The book of Joel has certainly lent itself to a wide range of interpretation. One particular approach is to downplay or actually eliminate any view of the book that includes predictions about the end-time days. In this camp, Garrett appears to be representative:

Modern Christian readers should avoid interpreting every reference to clouds and darkness or to the day of the LORD as the literal end of the world. They should also be cautious about finding details of a future “great tribulation” in the Book of Joel. Such a reading of the book springs from the false premise that the day of the LORD has only a single, future reference or fulfillment. In reality, the day of the LORD is more of a theological idea than a specific event. As a theological idea it can manifest itself in human history many times and in many forms.⁶

The caution not to read eschatology into passages where it does not belong is a valid point. However, there is a problem with Garrett’s warning not to find details of a future “great tribulation” in the book. On what basis does he make the claim? Apparently, he believes that those who see eschatology in the book do so because they see the term *day of the Lord* as automatically eschatological and singular with no other option for it. However, this is woefully off the mark. I agree with his last two statements that the day of the Lord is more a concept than specific event and that the day of the Lord terminology is used in Scripture of multiple events and times. In fact, I believe it is used to apply to more than one event in the book of Joel itself. Yet, I believe firmly that Joel contains predictions about the end-time days.

The same discussion emerges from Sandy’s work. In my written and verbal discussions with him it seemed that he saw little or no eschatology in the book of Joel. One concern he had was the misuse of the day of the Lord which Garrett above noted. Interestingly, I have to agree with Sandy and Garrett that interpreters have sometimes missed the mark in defining this term. The vast number of interpretive options should convince us to be cautious in our teaching in the matter. Almost all dispensational interpreters will give a general definition something along the lines of a time or event in history when God breaks through in judgment (usually upon Israel but not necessarily). It can have a near meaning in certain contexts (i.e., if one takes the locusts as a day of the Lord judgment near in time to Joel’s own day). It can also function as a predictive term for judgment involving end-time events (e.g., 2 Thess. 2:2-4). However, after these general ideas, the impression of disarray is startling. I have heard the day of the Lord defined in the following ways relative to end-time events: (1) the judgment events associated with the coming of Christ to earth at the end of the tribulation period; (2) the severe destruction events associated with the judgment by fire at the end of the millennium (2 Peter 3:10-13); (3) the millennium so that # 1 and # 2 can both be covered by a definite period of time; (4) the last three and one-half

⁶ D. A. Garrett, *Hosea, Joel*, New American Commentary, Vol. 19A (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2001), 306.

years of the tribulation (i.e., the Great Tribulation); (5) the last three and one-half years of the tribulation plus the millennium to encompass all previous things on the list; (6) the entire seven years of the tribulation period, and (7) the entire seven years of the tribulation period plus the millennium to encompass all previous things on the list.

Right away when confronted with such a record, I am easily convinced that we have wrongfully turned a non-technical term into a technical term that means the same thing most places in the text and as a result are struggling with it. It is better to suggest that the day of the Lord is simply a concept. It is God breaking through in history in judging acts. This term is applied in many different contexts. The term itself does not bring its own definition beyond the simple definition above. The context of each usage will help us to know the event or time period under consideration for any *particular* day of the Lord. To be sure, I do believe that the Thessalonian correspondence especially lends itself to seeing what we call the seven-year tribulation period as the day of the Lord. Coupled with some OT usage, it seems that it is used sometimes of end-time events, in particular, a time period when Israel and the Gentile nations are judged by God. Furthermore, this time is immediately prior to the restoration of Israel to its land in ultimate kingdom restoration.⁷ However, this should not be taken to mean that every occurrence of the term has this time reference.

But the question remains for the book of Joel. Does the day of the Lord terminology in this particular prophet lend itself to an eschatological interpretation and, if so, on what grounds? Sandy answers in the negative partly because cosmic imagery which is often cited to justify the eschatological view can be found in contexts where there is no eschatology. In particular, he draws our attention to Habakkuk 3:4-11. Secondly, he views Joel as not pointing to the details of how God was going to judge (regardless of the timing), but as focusing on the impact it should have on the lives of the reader.

In response, it must be noted that the appeal to Habakkuk is a good one to establish that cosmic signs alone are not enough to ascertain an eschatological overtone. However, there are a couple of points to be made beyond this acknowledgment. First, the cosmic sign verses of Joel, unlike those given in Habakkuk, contain some statements of permanence: “there has never been anything like it, nor will there be again after it to the years of many generations” (2:2). In fact, this is only one of five such statements of permanence in Joel. There are at least four other statements of permanence as I call them in Joel—2:19 (“I will never again make you a reproach among the nations”); 2:26 (“Then my people will never be put to shame”); 3:17 (“So Jerusalem will be holy, and strangers will pass through it no more”), and 3:20 (“But Judah will be inhabited forever, and Jerusalem for all generations”). If taken at face value, none of these statements have been fulfilled in history.⁸ Sandy will probably say this is part of hyperbolic and poetic speech which is a detail that should not be sought. To do so would be to obscure the major point of personal response sought by Joel. However, I believe my view is a plausible one exegetically. Beyond that, when I do theological synthesis with other texts, I find similar wording to Joel 2:2 in two others passages elsewhere in the Bible, both of which are clearly eschatological. One is

⁷ See Randall Price, “OT Tribulation Terms” in *When the Trumpet Sounds* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House, 1995), 58-83.

⁸ One of the problems for interpreters is that many start the eschatological section of Joel in 2:28 which would exclude the two earlier statements of permanence. Thus, those from Sandy’s perspective are likely to see the hyperbolic use of such wording partly because of this fact. On the other side, the problem would be justifying the eschatological nature of these two statements. Either the eschatological section starts earlier or some special use of imagery would be in play.

Daniel 12:1 (“And there will be a time of distress as such as never occurred since there was a nation until that time”) and the other is Matthew 24:21 (“for then there will be a great tribulation, such as has not occurred since the beginning of the world until now, nor ever shall”). This in my mind at least raises the possibility of eschatological intentions. I do not see this as necessarily cutting off the consideration of personal response for the original audience of Joel or present day readers.

Second, there are some eschatological commonalities between the prophecies of Joel and other passages in the Bible. One example is highlighted by Crenshaw – the formula “on that day” from 3:18, besides showing signs of “echoes” from many prophetic texts, “introduces ideas resembling those in Zechariah 12-14, where the linking formula also occurs. Its presence in Ezekiel 38 and 39 is noteworthy, inasmuch as the content of these chapters coincides with that of Joel in several respects (cf. also the so-called apocalypse of Isaiah, especially chapters 24 and 27).”⁹ It is difficult to maintain that Zechariah 12-14, Ezekiel 38-39, and Isaiah 24-27 contain no eschatology. Comparison to eschatological details in the New Testament leads to the same conclusion. There is a sequence in Joel of judgment (2:28-32), restoration of Judah and Jerusalem (3:1), and a judgment of the nations (3:2-12) that correlates quite nicely with later revelation given in Matthew 24-25 and even in Revelation 6-22. Thus, the idea that eschatological details may yield some certainty at least comes to the surface for consideration in comparison to Joel. We are not suggesting that the book of Joel is to be interpreted *by means of* these other texts within the canon. The most important factor in interpreting the book of Joel is its own text. However, it is not methodologically deficient to compare how similar terms and themes are used in other literature within the collection of God’s many words, especially when one finds a common time frame or kind of literature. Sandy does this in comparing the particular themes of warning and repentance to highlight the ethical obligations that the prophets are consistently proclaiming.¹⁰ Why can we not do the same comparative procedure relative to the eschatological details as well?

Sandy might say that my correlation here is the “result of reading the OT through the lens of the NT and through one particular eschatological system.”¹¹ I do not believe so. Again, I am simply making the inductive observation that the flow of one matches the sequencing and content of the other. I am doing a theological synthesis across testaments involving the repetition of common elements. This is another way that the eschatological possibility is brought to attention in the book of Joel even though the exegesis of Joel does not depend upon the New Testament texts mentioned.

What is the significance of discussions like these? Sandy has a concern that the eschatological approach to the book of Joel is a searching for details that obscures the real, practical message of Joel. In other words, searching for details about end-time events leads to a lack of clarity. It has puzzled me throughout to understand the prophets (and Joel) this way. The right approach is to understand that the various *details* in the text, eschatological or not, highlight this real practical message that God gives. Why is it kosher to find ethical details in the text but not eschatological ones? I am not suggesting we import eschatology into a text when there is no

⁹ James L. Crenshaw, *Joel: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, The Anchor Bible (New York: Doubleday, 1995), 198.

¹⁰ Sandy, “*Plowshares and Pruning Hooks* and the Hermeneutics of Dispensationalism,” 1-2.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 23.

basis for it. But it seems to me that there may be in Sandy's system an unjustified selectivity when viewing the exegetical facts of the prophetic texts. When we study texts, we are not "looking" for eschatological details or for ethical teachings. We are looking for truth as God gives it. If texts yield eschatology, so be it. If they give us ethical warnings, that is fine. If they report to us both, we accept things as Scripture provides.

In preparation for this discussion, I investigated numerous commentaries both conservative and liberal to find any trends that existed relative to the book of Joel. Specifically, I was interested in whether interpreters *regularly* see the text as yielding statements about the eschaton. My unscientific poll leads to a positive assertion of eschatology. Perhaps most future commentaries in the postmodern era will go a different direction. However, for now it is not surprising to see commentaries, recent or older, liberal or conservative, make a statement about Joel like the venerable Pusey:

The chief characteristic of the Prophet's style is perhaps its simple vividness. Every thing is set before our eyes, as though we ourselves saw it. This is alike the character of the description of the desolation in the first chapter; the advance of the locusts in the second; or that more awful gathering in the valley of Jehoshaphat, described in the third. The Prophet adds detail to detail; each, clear, brief, distinct, a picture in itself, yet adding to the effect of the whole. We can, without an effort, bring the whole of each picture before our eyes.¹²

This statement is within the context of a commentary that avows a personal Antichrist and the conversion of the Jews just prior to the end-time judgment of the nations, relating such things to the actual passages in the text of Joel.¹³ Apparently, Pusey sees the details conjoined with the poetic beauty and power of the passages as servicing both ethical concerns and eschatological predictions. It is a "both/and" not an "either/or" as Sandy seems to suggest.

In addition, Allen comments that Joel's message concerning the day of the Lord goes well beyond the immediate circumstances of Joel's day, while at the same time providing a warning for the original audience:

To interpret the day of Yahweh and similar eschatological motifs as merely poetic and hyperbolic metaphors is to do Joel an injustice. They represent rather a conviction that the end is at hand, heralded in this unprecedented destruction caused by the locusts, which threatened the very survival of the community.¹⁴

Note that Allen implicitly asserts that style does not by itself determine meaning. The eschatological content cannot be dismissed easily by resorting to elements of poetry and hyperbole. Allen does not deny that figurative language exists within the book of Joel. However, he refuses to label eschatological elements, especially major ones which use the day of

¹² E. B. Pusey, *The Minor Prophets: A Commentary: Explanatory and Practical*, Barnes' Notes on the Old and New Testament (reprint ed., Grand Rapids: Baker, 1978), p. 155.

¹³ The statements of Pusey are consistent with the common, classical postmillennialism of the nineteenth century.

¹⁴ Leslie C. Allen, *The Books of Joel, Obadiah, Jonah and Micah*, The New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976), 30.

the Lord terminology, in such a way as to emasculate their futuristic import in every passage where the term occurs. By the time one gets to Joel 2:28-32, the day of the Lord is, in the mind of Allen, related to the teaching of Jesus: “These cosmic signs heralded the Day for the nations as surely as the locusts did for Judah...The eschatological teaching of Jesus applied these phenomena to the future, partly the time of Jerusalem’s destruction (A.D. 70) and partly that of the final judgment....”¹⁵

My point in mentioning the foregoing interpreters is not that I agree with them in all particulars. I want to stress that there are those even outside the dispensational tradition who cannot escape the truth of eschatology in the book of Joel. If there are problems in forcing eschatology into the words of Joel when they do not belong, such problems are not inherently driven by the nature of dispensationalism. The conclusion from diverse scholars that there is eschatology in Joel points in the direction that the language contains a measure of prophetic certainty. The book of Joel simply cannot be tossed onto the heap of ambiguity.

Big Picture versus Exegetical Details in Prophetic Language

The main area of discussion concerning Joel above involved the question of the presence of eschatology in the book and the belief on the part of some like Sandy that we miss the mark if we look for eschatology. Along the way, the issues of poetic and hyperbolic language emerged as well as the questions of looking at details or embracing only a big or top level idea in the text. Here we will explore further the concept of a big picture versus exegetical details when looking at prophetic texts.

To begin the discussion I want to acknowledge an improvement that Sandy made in his ETS presentation when compared with his book *Plowshares and Pruning Hooks*. The upgrade in his approach is the abandonment of the metaphor of *translucence* to describe the nature of prophecy. This is one element in his book, although not the only one, which drives many who have read it to label it as subjective. He now clarifies: “Though not identified as a fault by reviewers, I have reconsidered my use of the metaphor of *translucence* to describe prophecy. I am concerned that describing prophecy as ambiguous misrepresents the prophet’s message. They spoke clearly and forcefully.”¹⁶ It is simply not possible to say that prophecy is so powerful (as Sandy often does) when at the same time it is so ambiguous. Otherwise, its power would lie in mysticism. This is a positive step in my opinion and Sandy is to be applauded for taking it and stating it this way. The fruit of this change may be enormous.

Nonetheless, Sandy may take with his left hand what he gives with the right. I speak chiefly of the big picture versus details, the either/or, that he voices in his method. We had noted earlier his encouragement that we need to step back and see the big picture. Here is where he still hangs on to the concept of translucence (perhaps only from the reader’s point of view) when he says “the notion that prophecy is translucent only applies if we fail to understand prophetic poetry and seek to discover details about what is going to happen in the imagery the prophets employed.”¹⁷ Later he will again argue that prophecy becomes “translucent when we go hunting

¹⁵ Ibid., 100. Compare also Elizabeth Achtemeier’s similar conclusion from a less conservative perspective (“The Book of Joel: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections” in *The New Interpreter’s Bible*, Vol. VII [Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996], 331).

¹⁶ Sandy, “*Plowshares and Pruning Hooks* and the Hermeneutics of Dispensationalism,” 15.

¹⁷ Ibid.

for details.”¹⁸ In other words, if we pay attention to details in prophecy, we will only end up with ambiguity and uncertainty.

It is here that I invoke my “both/and” penchant once again and show a concern on the other side of the spectrum from Sandy’s thoughts. While I do not suggest that in each and every case details are as clear as the big idea of any passage, I want to argue that the details, even in poetic prophecy, have an important place in the interpretive process. A few examples will suffice to indicate that seeing eschatological detail does not automatically unravel the big idea or lead to a measure of uncertainty in interpretation.

Luke 19:11-27 and the Parable of the Minas

Just before Jesus enters Jerusalem at the triumphal entry he tells the so-called parable of the minas, or as I like to say, the *parable of delay*. The big picture is quite clear since it is exegetically stated in verse 11. Jesus told them the parable was given for the purpose of letting the crowds know (if they would receive it) that the kingdom was not going to occur right away in keeping with their expectations. The details of the actual parable show at least the following elements: (1) a nobleman representing Christ who is going to leave and then later return, (2) citizens/enemies representing those who reject Him (including the Jewish leaders), (3) slaves representing followers of Christ, (4) rewards given to the slaves when the nobleman returns which are described in administrative terms, the ruling common to kingdom passages. It is these details which actually frame and yield the plot line that teaches the big idea. The details with their symbolism are rather clear in this particular parable and provide a powerful and picturesque way for the audience to grasp the didactic statement in verse 11.

In my early days as a Christian I was taught that the details of parables mattered. When I got to seminary, they knocked that notion out of me suggesting that only the big idea of the parable mattered. Over the years I have moved back toward the middle and a “both/and” where a synergy exists between details and big picture. One of the reasons is that when Jesus interprets parables on rare occasions, he actually discusses the details. My concern in this whole debate is that the constant downplaying of details in prophecy (including many parables) will truncate the intended message of God.

Ezekiel 40-48 and the Millennial Vision

A second example may be more instructive and certainly raises more questions in my mind. In Ezekiel 40-48 we see what traditional dispensationalists have often described as millennial truth. The details of this prophetic portion of Scripture are many. One can get lost in the minutiae easily. In this vision there are the fine points of temple construction, the glory of God filling the temple as well as various offerings, gates, and land allotments. Do these details matter? Could it be that Ezekiel 40-48 is one large extended metaphor with one big idea? If so, what would that idea be? Without the details mattering, the big picture of the entire passage (which I do not take as an extended metaphor) could easily be quite vague and ambiguous, even bordering on non-textual or allegorical understandings.

To consider this issue in Ezekiel, it might be instructive to begin with a statement from Eichrodt, no friend of dispensationalism. In a survey of possible ways to understand Ezekiel 40-

¹⁸ Ibid., 20.

48, one of the options would be “a prophetic vision of a future which the divine Lord of the people will bring into effect in his own time in complete independence from man, *something therefore which we must not set down in detail, since it is enough to describe the general aims of the divine action*, without wanting to anticipate the divine freedom in his creation of the new people” (italics supplied).¹⁹ Eichrodt uses the category of myth frequently throughout his commentary. However, the main point here is to notice his opinion that if there were genuine, futuristic eschatology in Ezekiel 40-48, we would not be able to look at the details and could only describe it in terms of general aims. The big idea trumps the details. In fact, the way this is said, the details are not the foundational points upon which the big idea would rest. Therefore, there is perhaps ambiguity and certainly a lack of literalness to the words. This comes through at various points, one of which is the following understanding of Ezekiel 47:1-12 – “This symbolic power of what the prophet says reveals under a new aspect how the eschatological fulfilment can only be portrayed by means of images which point beyond themselves and which set a personal relationship with God at the centre of God’s redemption and bestowal of grace.”²⁰ The statements about Jewish elements are downplayed by such an interpretive strategy. For example, the geographical sites mentioned in verse 10, which are all within the nation of Israel, are not taken for what they say but for an alleged larger purpose. Eichrodt concludes, “The return of paradise, apparently at present limited to Palestine, is of its very nature a universal event embracing the whole world. So we may take it for granted without further demonstration that Palestine is a part that stands for the whole.”²¹ I must disagree and cannot take it for granted. Eichrodt is reading into the words of Ezekiel a theology that comes from elsewhere. While it is true that God’s end-time plan is for the whole world, it does not automatically follow that Ezekiel has such a scope in mind. In this case, a big idea that is bigger than the passage overrides the immediate details in Eichrodt’s approach.

Moreover, recalling Sandy’s reluctance to mine for eschatological details in the texts of the prophets, another point materializes. In a review of Sandy’s *Plowshares and Pruning Hooks*, Johnson commented that “While this extensive consideration of the use of language is comprehensive, it deemphasizes an important aspect of literal interpretation, which states that whether the language is metaphorical or literal it must refer to an actual referent.”²² Sandy responded that he agrees with Johnson on this point.²³ However, it is hard to reconcile this agreement with a downplaying of details. If details matter little, then a lot of referents are in jeopardy of being ignored. At stake may be grammatical-historical interpretation. Thus, I am

¹⁹ Walther Eichrodt, *Ezekiel*, The Old Testament Library (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1970), 531.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 585.

²¹ *Ibid.* Daniel Block does not downplay the details in quite the way that Eichrodt does, although he minimizes eschatology in the details in Ezekiel 40-48 largely based upon the absence of eschatological language (*The Book of Ezekiel Chapters 25-48*, The New International Commentary on the Old Testament [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998], 504-05). However, Block does not take into account apocalyptic aspects within the section (see Lamar Eugene Cooper, Sr., *Ezekiel*, The New American Commentary, Volume 17 [Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1994], 353-54).

²² Elliott Johnson, “Review of D. Brent Sandy’s *Plowshares and Pruning Hooks*,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 165 (Jan—Mar 2005): 119. Sandy alludes to this quote in “*Plowshares and Pruning Hooks* and the Hermeneutics of Dispensationalism,” 15.

²³ Sandy, “*Plowshares and Pruning Hooks* and the Hermeneutics of Dispensationalism,” 15.

much more comfortable with a “both/and” approach to the big picture and the details which yield it. It is impossible to take the details of Ezekiel seriously in my judgment if we go another direction.

The Book of Amos

A pagan friend of mine once told me that the message of the prophets is “Woe is me! Things are going to be bad!” He had some of this right. Of course there is the call to repentance that must be taken seriously for the generation to whom the texts were written and to those who follow by way of application. A temporal redemption is needed. I take the book of Amos as almost paradigmatic. After a lively introduction invoking judgment upon pagans and Judah, the southern prophet sent north hammers Israel for its forsaking of God’s law and the lack of righteous and ethical behavior in point after point. This needed to be changed and constitutes the big picture of Amos.

However, one still notices at the end of the book, a short and abruptly introduced conclusion that gives predictive prophecy to announce the restoration of the unity of David’s house and the end of the divided kingdom (Amos 9:11-15). Moreover, the restoration that is envisioned calls upon the eschaton with the words “I will plant them on their land, and they will not again be rooted out from their land which I have given them.” I do not take this as hyperbole, but as the promise of the longed-for eschaton. Such a prediction and promise is not out of place here. I am not inserting it where it does not belong. God’s ultimate fulfillment for the nation becomes a basis for the rest of the book to be viewed through glasses of hope as well as judgment language. This seems to me to be characteristic of the style of the prophets.

Poetry and Metaphor

I want to make several brief comments about poetry and metaphor in prophetic language, areas that need more study by traditional dispensationalists who, I am afraid, do not have sufficient interest in working through the details. First, another way in which the postmodern spirit seems to be at work is seen in Sandy’s insistence that we must rid ourselves of modernistic presuppositions and jettison our suspicion of poetry.²⁴ Our Enlightenment mindset causes us to be too like the engineer. And we all know what engineers will do to the Psalms! As a recovering engineer, I must protest a little.²⁵ I am not suspicious of poetry because of my commitment to Enlightenment principles. I am suspicious of poetry because of my English lit teacher in college. He taught us about the powerful teaching of John Donne’s early seventeenth-century poem *The Flea*. It was a poem about a young man trying to seduce a coy maiden by convincing her it would not hurt her any more than a flea bite. My teacher, a full-blown pagan, taught our class that the story was an allegory expressing the doctrine of the Trinity: the man, the maiden, and the flea as the Father, Son, and Spirit. This was said even though the evidence might suggest that Donne’s poem was pre-conversion. In my opinion, it was a poem that should have been taken more at “face-value” like the book of Romans to get the intended meaning of the love poem. Poetry is often a lot more straightforward than interpreters allow. The discussion does not always go the way that Sandy and others tend to emphasize.

²⁴ Ibid., 11.

²⁵ I worked as an aerospace engineer in a past life.

Second, I want to point out a tension in Sandy and those who emphasize metaphor in the text. If I understand him, the abundant use of metaphor predominates in the poetic language of the prophets, which in turn implies that we should not overemphasize the clarity of eschatological details. Yet on other occasions, Sandy suggests that metaphorical language heightens meaning and gives it more punch so that the readers/hearers can emotionally embrace the meaning.²⁶ In fact, Sandy goes so far to say “Though poetry may seem an odd medium for the revelation of God’s truth, it has the potential to be more complete and exact in its intended communication.”²⁷ I agree that metaphor and poetic language even in prophetic texts can give a complete meaning. Where I disagree is in the final interpretation of whether eschatological details are part of what is discovered.

Third, related to the above, Sandy urges us not to quickly scamper through prophecy in a literalistic fashion in violation of its genre or its poetic nature. To be sure, no one I know has been extremely off the mark on this point. Has anyone ever taken the sword in Jesus’ mouth (Rev. 19:15) at the Second Coming in a woodenly literal way? If they have, I have never encountered them. As someone who was raised in the Deep South of the United States, I know quite well that figurative language is part of life and literature! My northern friends are likely to tell their children “if you don’t be quiet I am going to spank you.” I am more likely to say “if you don’t be quiet I am going to be on you like a tick on a hound dog.” Children usually do not lack clarity on such a statement. The Hebrews were no different. Sandy is quite right that metaphorical and poetical language heightens the truth and gives it some punch, so to speak. However, in the matter of certainty, I ask why this cannot also be true of eschatological details when they are actually in the text.

Let me make some other observations that I hope will bring some exactness to the discussion. I think the tenor of statements scattered throughout Sandy’s presentation is the correct recognition that grammatical-historical understanding of a text (literal hermeneutics) is a broad enough category to encompass all kinds of literary devices. This is different than whether a phrase or a section is poetic in nature or a figure of speech. I often ask my students how they know that a particular section of the Bible is a certain genre. Do they read a Bible handbook that tells them and another book that gives them the rules to read that genre? The fact of the matter is that grammatical-historical reading takes place before one recognizes the genre. In other words, genre is discovered in the text. This discovery allows the interpreter to know the lay of the ground so to speak. If he sees the elements of poetry (e.g., figures of speech and parallelism), he will take pains to read carefully the whole section with those things in mind, being careful not to see things that are not there. Thus, using the poetic understanding of a text is a second-order observation that comes after the first-order grammatical-historical reading.

Fourth, in keeping with what we have already discussed, Sandy notes that the creative imagination of the prophet is not about giving precise detail. It is not about “information transfer” but “transformation.”²⁸ While I understand what he is trying to say, there is an “either/or” presented here that would better be served by a “both/and.” While the big idea of a section of poetry may be the point, there is still cognitive information that is conveyed that is the vehicle by which the transformation is attained. Further, Sandy says that reading biblical poetry

²⁶ Sandy, “*Plowshares and Pruning Hooks and the Hermeneutics of Dispensationalism*,” 7-10.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 10.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 8.

“means looking *through* the words to see the author’s point not at the words.”²⁹ I am reminded of his exhortation in *Plowshares and Pruning Hooks* to listen to prophecy with my heart and not just my head.³⁰ I must confess that I am not quite sure how to do that. It is the content of the words that conveys what my mind must use to tell my whole being how to respond. I know the power of the language by understanding the words in context. He goes on to say that “to discover the authorial intent we must probe the author’s expressions in order to distinguish between intended truths and imaginative ways of describing them.”³¹ I am not sure that we should distinguish anything. Intended truths are given *by means of* imaginative ways of describing them. Once again, a “both/and” is more appropriate.

Finally, there is also the statement that reading poetry is closer to using a kaleidoscope than to using a microscope, a postmodern-modern dichotomy if ever there was one.³² Even though poetry is simply not straightforward, normal speech as found in a computer manual, the idea of a kaleidoscope does not convey to me the advancement of understanding. If the words of the prophets are anything, they are an unveiling of God’s thoughts. That’s what revelation is. The image of a kaleidoscope brings to mind distortion rather than unveiling, an uncertain image rather than a picture of what is really there to be seen. Sandy’s intention is certainly to show that a literalistic rendering sometimes ignores the emotional impacts of statements. His example of hitting you “so hard your mother feels it” was clearly picturesque.³³ I agree that poetry is “language with the volume turned up.”³⁴ On the other hand, however, I do not want to describe my pursuit of poetic meaning with language that diminishes the idea of seeing the revelatory text as it is from God.

Conclusion

There are certain things that dispensationalists should not do. At the top of the list is that we should never sensationalize prophecy. Beyond that, we cannot insert the eschaton into prophetic passages where it does not belong. We should not “find” the panorama of the ages in almost every narrative as Arno C. Gaebelien tried to do.³⁵ We cannot ignore hyperbole as a figure of speech (I just used hyperbole in speaking of Gaebelein!). We should not find the rapture lurking behind every simile in poetry and prose. Some of the cautions of writers like Sandy have merit. However, they often go way too far.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Sandy, *Plowshares and Pruning Hooks*, 198.

³¹ Sandy, “*Plowshares and Pruning Hooks* and the Hermeneutics of Dispensationalism,” 8.

³² Ibid., 9.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid., 10.

³⁵ For example, see Gaebelein’s commentaries *The Gospel of Matthew: An Exposition* (New York: Publication Office Our Hope, 1910) and *The Gospel of John: A Complete Analytical Exposition of the Gospel of John* (Wheaton, IL: Van Kampen Press, 1936).

I have often wondered about the specific motivations for such a view. The proponents voice a conviction that they are truly following the text. Nonetheless, from my vantage point I see a stronger emphasis on the reader/interpreter than found among traditional dispensationalists. The downplaying of eschatological details that we have seen appears to be motivated by a desire to get to the present application for the reader in terms of social justice and ethics. Using the categories of speech act theory, they want to get past the locution of a text to action.

In my opinion, the real motivation may involve sensitivity to embarrassment. Unwarranted concern about “searching” for eschatology is misplaced in Sandy’s and others’ writings largely as a reaction to pop culture and theology wars rather than as a by-product of letting the text direct the heart and mind. Note Sandy’s emotional words:

Unfortunately the zeal to know how—and for some, when—the future will unfold has led interpreters to rush to conclusions. They fail to take time to understand prophecy as the authors intended and the hearers understood. The result is all kinds of speculations and dogmas and denominations and sects. The misinterpretations of the biblical text have been manifold and dangerous and embarrassing. Examples are everywhere, from the Millerites to the Branch Davidians. Even in irenic discussions among evangelicals, different positions on eschatology are described as ‘rival global solutions’ that draw ‘battle-lines’ between themselves.³⁶

It is certainly true that all of us should be embarrassed—or perhaps a better word is *angered*—by the abuses of prophetic language by false interpreters at all levels, academic or popular. However, the response of Sandy is problematic. Withdrawal from certainty in the details of eschatology is not the answer.

Could we not draw an analogy to other doctrines? Are we not in a “war” right now in evangelical circles over the nature of justification? Has not the nature of the church been a contentious matter forever? Will we ever quit arguing about inerrancy? How *green* should an evangelical be? I thought we settled the issue of the new covenant at our last Council! The fact is that in all of these and many more areas of Bible interpretation, life is directly affected. Why does the language of prophecy get special attention? Perhaps the issue deserves it. But, using a counterexample, I do not see at the present time large numbers of evangelicals moving to the cessationist position because some are embarrassed by the bizarre theology and practice of some faith healers. The movement seems the other way. All biblical truth matters. All biblical truth is controversial. We should not address doctrine out of a sense of embarrassment. We should follow our literal hermeneutic and let God lead us where He wants us to go, even when interpretation is difficult. In the end, we will find that meaning is more certain than many want to admit, even when God’s sovereignly designed end-time events are in view.

³⁶ Sandy, *Plowshares and Pruning Hooks*, 57.