

Prophetic Idiom

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When the prophets spoke of the Messiah's reign they described it in terms and figures of speech drawn from their Israelite context. They predicted, for example, that the Messiah would reign on the throne of David, but in the fulfillment this turned out to be prophetic idiom for Christ's exaltation at the Father's right hand (Acts 2:25-36; cp. the way James interprets Amos 9:11-12 in Acts 15:13-20). They also said that the nations would stream to Mt. Zion to be taught the law (Micah 4:1-5). But in the fulfillment, Mt. Zion became the heavenly Jerusalem where Christ reigns and to which we Gentiles come by faith regardless of our literal geographic location (John 4:21; Gal 4:26; Heb 12:22). Prophetic idiom also occurs in the NT prophetic passages when the future is described in language colored by a Judaic context (e.g., Matt 24:16; 2 Thess 2:4; Rev 20:9).

Herman Ridderbos explains this concept in more detail:

We must try to gain an insight into the character of the prophetic way of foretelling the future. And it should not be forgotten that this is something different than a diary of future events. Prophecies are not based on a partial transference of the divine omniscience to man. Jesus explicitly states that even the Son does not share in the divine omniscience with respect to the time of the end. The function of prophecy is consequently not that of a detailed projection of the future, but is the urgent insistence on the certainty of the things to come. This explains why, at the end of the vista, the perspective is lacking ... This limitation of the perspective ... is connected with the fact that *the prophet paints the future in the colors and with the lines that he borrows from the world known to him*, i.e., from his own environment. It is also true that the nations, the inhabited world, etc., occur in the eschatological picture. But this does not imply that the prophet has been equipped with geographical omniscience, that his view comprises continents in their qualities and differentiation, and that he is now able to give a universal geographical picture of the world. Just as the time of the future is ultimately contracted to one point, so the world-space is to him a totality and not an accurately differentiated magnitude. *We see the prophets paint the future with the palette of their own experience and project the picture within their own geographical horizon*. This appears in the OT prophets in all kinds of ways. And in our opinion, this is also the explanation of Jesus' description of the future. He follows the OT most closely, and not only is the temporal perspective lacking at the end, but the geographical horizon within which the eschatological events take place is also restricted in some places to the country of Judea or to the cities of Israel. To our mind, this must not be explained allegorically ... nor should we speak of errors. Here we are confronted with a peculiarity in the prophetic description of future events. It is better to speak here of poetic and figurative representations than of allegorical pictures.¹

¹ Hermann Ridderbos, *The Coming of the Kingdom*, trans. Raymond O. Zorn (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1975), 524-25 (emphasis added).

Meredith Kline refers to this as “typological idiom.”

Dispensationalism’s virtual rejection of the typological identity of the first level kingdom finds expression in their literalistic misinterpretation of prophecies that depict the second level kingdom in the *typological idiom* of the first level model. Hence the difference between the dispensational and covenantal hermeneutics is sometimes described as one of literal versus figurative exegesis. But the terms literal and figurative obscure the precise nature of the difference between these two approaches. The terms literal and figurative suggest the issue is of a more general literary sort, whereas it is primarily of an historical nature. Specifically, it concerns contrary analyses of the relationship of two successive covenantal orders in redemptive history, one approach being nontypological and the other typological.²

Example: Zechariah 14

Both premillennialists and postmillennialists appeal to several elements in vv. 10-21 in an effort to find biblical substantiation for their claim that there is an as-yet future phase of Christ’s kingdom to be characterized by an external, visible glory that stops short of the perfection of the eternal state. This passage seems to contain a description of such a time. “The Lord will be king over all the earth,” and yet any nation that does not go up to Jerusalem to worship the Lord will experience the covenantal curse of drought. So intensified will be the Lord’s glorious reign that “Holy to the Lord” will be written even on the common cooking pots in the temple. Yet, sin will not be completely eradicated. These twin features—on the one hand, external glory; on the other hand, remnants of sin—seem to be compatible with only a premillennial or postmillennial construction.

How, then, does the amillennialist handle these data? Using the hermeneutical key of prophetic idiom we can find our solution. But first we must consider a fundamental presupposition: the Israelite theocracy was constituted by God to be a shadowy, typological microcosm of the ultimate, eternal kingdom. The salient features of Israel (theocratic holiness; the visible presence of God dwelling in the midst of the people; the land; the temporal blessings and curses conditioned upon covenant faithfulness, etc.) must all be analyzed in terms of their typological function in the history of redemption. In sum, Israel itself is one grand type of the eternal kingdom. In particular, it is absolutely essential to understand the purpose and significance of the temporal blessings and curses that were held forth to Israel depending on whether she remained faithful to the covenant (Lev 26; Deut 27-30). Long life in the land, fertility, success in battle, political peace—these were the blessings promised if Israel walked in the Lord’s statutes and kept his commandments. But sudden terror, early death, infertility, panic in battle, famine, drought, socio-political upheaval, and captivity—these were the curses Israel could expect if she did not remain in exclusive covenantal loyalty to her Lord. These dual sanctions of the covenant were temporal shadows pointing to the far greater realities of eschatological punishment in hell and eternal felicity in heaven (as Paul explains in Gal 3:10-14).

² Meredith G. Kline, *Kingdom Prologue: Genesis Foundations for a Covenantal Worldview* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2006), 341 (emphasis added).

Prophetic idiom, therefore, involves the depiction of the eternal state (both in blessedness for the elect and in judgment for the reprobate) by means of the language originally employed by Moses on the earthly, typological level. Thus, the wicked are described as having no rain (Zech 14:17-18; cf. Deut 11:17; 1 Kings 8:35). Likewise, the spotless purity of the redeemed citizenry of heaven is presented in typological language borrowed from the Mosaic covenant: “There will no longer be a Canaanite in the house of the Lord of hosts in that day” (Zech 14:21). Those elements found in the last portion of Zechariah 14 which to the premillennialist or postmillennialist appear as limitations and qualifications incompatible with the perfection and sinlessness of the eternal state turn out instead to be easily explainable as instances of prophetic idiom.