

The following is chapter three from the book *Thoughts on the Times and Seasons of Sacred Prophecy* by Thomas Rawson Birks (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1880). In this chapter, Birks lays out the evidence for the literal interpretation of prophecy. It is well done, and he makes a very strong case.

### CHAPTER III.

#### THE PRINCIPLES OF PROPHETIC INTERPRETATION.

THE Apostle St. Peter describes the word of prophecy by a solemn and instructive emblem, as "a light that shineth in a dark place." The present world, we are thus taught, and experience confirms the truth, is like a troubled and trackless ocean. It is a place which sin has filled with confusion, and buried in gloom. Its history is one perpetual round of strife, and war, and tumultuous violence. Empires may rise and perish; generations may come and pass away; but the confusion is still the same. The children of the world walk on still in darkness. The mystery and the gloom are as deep as ever; and while the Christian gazes thoughtfully on the scene, the inquiry of the prophet rises to his lips, "O my Lord, what shall be the end of these things?"

But the word of prophecy is a bright and cheering lamp amid the world's darkness. There, in those sacred pages we behold a scheme of redemption which is from everlasting to everlasting, but which is daily unfolding itself in the history of our fallen world. There we learn that however the counsels of man may fail, though empires may perish and generations may pass away, there is a counsel that shall stand for ever, and a kingdom that cannot be destroyed,—the counsel of God, and the kingdom of the Most High. The mist and darkness are rolled away from the landscape of Divine Providence, and we can trace from age to age the unveiling of God's infinite goodness, in the recovery of our guilty race to the presence of His holiness, and the enjoyment of His love. The dispensations of His grace present themselves in succession to our view; and still, as they advance, increase in their clearness and beauty, till at length the triumph of a Saviour's mercy is complete, and "the kingdoms of this world become the kingdoms of our Lord." Thus the word of prophecy when received in simple faith, fulfils its appointed office as a beacon-light, and leads our thoughts onward through all the changes of time, to that "rest which remaineth for the people of God."

Light then, and not darkness is the true character of all the inspired prophecies. But the description applies most fully to those which predict the past desolation and future glory of Israel. The visions of Daniel and St. John retain an air of mystery that accords well with their reference to the Gentile dispensation, that time which is called emphatically, *the mystery of God*. But the prophecies which relate to the Jews are free from this symbolical veil. They are clothed in simple language; they stoop to our earthly estate; they are imbedded in the facts of history, and confirmed by visible earnestness of their truth. To the spiritual and sanctifying power which they share with all the Divine promises, they add the intense reality of persons, and scenes, and places, which are within our reach, or even before our eyes. The stronghold of man's unbelief lies in the things which are seen and temporal. But these prophecies assail it even here. They reveal to us a counsel of God plainly fulfilling itself on the face of the earth. They show us a country marked off, a people separated, as visible witnesses, first of His just severity against sin, and then of His overflowing mercy and unchangeable goodness. The spell of Infidelity is thus broken, which would keep our earth separate from heaven; and the golden links are seen already in being, which will shortly bind them together in perfect union. With a variety and fulness of truth, which opens a boundless field for hope, meditation, and prayer, there is in these predictions a simplicity which the meanest Christian may understand. The promise of God tempers itself to our feeble vision, and by a vision of the blessedness of the earthly Jerusalem prepares the eyes of Christians for the higher and fuller glory of the Jerusalem above.

When we turn from this view of prophecy to the actual state of the Church, how painful is the contrast! The light shines in the darkness, but the darkness receives it not. The lamp which God has vouchsafed to us for our guidance is neglected or even scorned, by the great body of those who bear the name of Christians. The calculations of their own worldly prudence eclipse the messages of the Infinite Wisdom. They boldly reverse the commandment of the Holy Ghost. While He charges us to take heed to the work of prophecy, they brand attention to it as enthusiastic folly, or the dreams of madness. Nay many, even of the followers of Christ, are entangled though to a less degree, in the same grievous snare, and practically discourage that which the Spirit of God so earnestly commends. So that a part of the inspired oracles, nearly as large as the whole of the New Testament, comes to be entirely neglected; or else furnishes, at most, only a few vague hopes and general lessons of warning; while its main purpose is overlooked, and the rich variety of Divine truth which it contains is uncared for and unexplored.

To what cause must we ascribe this neglect of Old Testament prophecy, which has been till of late, and we fear still continues to be so marked a feature of the Gentile Church? In the great body of nominal Christians it arises, doubtless, from man's natural aversion to the Word of God, and his dislike to realize the presence of his Maker. Its source, in more spiritual Christians, is the selfishness which clings even to the regenerate soul, and which struggles mightily against the power of Divine grace. In the unbeliever this selfishness reigns and triumphs; but where the work of faith is begun, the enemy puts on a spiritual garb, and tutors the soul to be selfish in the things of God. Personal safety is then placed higher than the glory of the Saviour. The question becomes, how low a stage of grace will secure from danger, not how largely may Christ be honoured and served. How little truth is sufficient and essential, not how much may we hope to receive, and how much is the God of all grace willing to bestow. And since the effect of the Jewish prophecies on personal edification is less self-evident than in some other parts of scripture, we doubt the wisdom of God, who pronounces every part to be profitable for our instruction in righteousness; and we thus remain under the blight of a spiritual selfishness, that withers and deadens all the strength of the soul.

But there is a further cause of this general neglect, in the wide-spread feeling of uncertainty and doubt as to the true sense of the Scripture prophecies. Many things have concurred to this effect; the mysteriousness which must be admitted, in some few of the prophecies themselves, the variations of numerous expositors, the gross perversions of some, the vague, uncertain allegories of others, and the currency of the false maxim, that all predictions when fulfilled are clear, and when unfulfilled, obscure and inexplicable. These causes and such as these, have changed the faith of multitudes in the Church into bewildering uncertainty. The vision, according to God's own warning, has become "as the words of a book that is sealed" (Isa. xxix. 11). Divines have maintained, in the face of the clearest examples and plainest warnings, that the inspired predictions were not meant to be understood till after their fulfilment. So that the metaphor of the apostle has been actually reversed. Christians have come to describe the word of prophecy, not as the beacon-light, but as a trackless and dangerous ocean. They have thus ventured to be wise above what is written, and have warned their brethren against that very study on which the Holy Spirit has pronounced a solemn and repeated blessing.

What then, in this state of the Church, is the duty of Christ's ministers, the appointed stewards of the mysteries of God? The words of the prophet (Hab. ii. 1,2) supply us with an answer. He had just given the Jews warning of the Chaldean invasion. The Spirit of God taught him that however plainly the message was given, they "would in no wise believe it." He prepares himself for sceptical doubts and contentious opposition. He seeks for wisdom from above. "I will stand upon my watch, and set me on my tower, and watch what He will say unto me, and what I shall answer when I am argued with." And he receives a gracious answer. He is to write the message in clear characters, and expose it on tablets to the public view, that even the most careless might have no excuse for ignorance. "The Lord answered and said unto me, Write the vision, and make it plain upon tablets, that he may run that readeth it."

The spirit of this command applies clearly to ministers of Christ in the present day. The importance of a knowledge of God's prophecies to the Church has not ceased, and cannot cease, till her Lord's return. The prophecy teaches this in the very next verse as explained by St. Paul. "The vision," we are told, "is for an appointed time," even "until He that shall come will come, and He will not tarry" (Hab. ii.3; Heb. x.37). Till then the same duty rests on His messengers. Since the word of prophecy has been covered with the mist of false glosses, or cankered by the rust of neglect, they must clear away the doubt that obscures it, and restore the engraving in fuller and broader relief; and so present it to a careless world with the stamp of God's veracity, and the bright and clear impress of heavenly and everlasting truth.

To fulfil this command, in humble dependence on the blessing of God, is my present aim. My object is to make the vision plain, as on tablets, to the most casual observer; and with this view, I would first explain what is meant by the literal interpretation of Old Testament prophecy, and then confirm it by scriptural arguments.

What then is the literal sense of prophecy? False notions on this point have been very general. Absurd consequences have been grafted upon these, in order to justify a system of glosses and allegories, and to transfer all the Jewish promises to the Gentile Church. The definition may be given in two forms, which agree in their result, and help to explain each other. First, the literal sense is that in which we adhere to the common usage of terms, and the natural scope of the passage as inferred from the context alone. Secondly, it is when we attach to a prophecy the same sense which we should naturally assign to it if it were a history of past events, and not a prediction of things future.

I will explain by a few examples. The prophet Isaiah, in chap. iv., has the following words: "And it shall come to pass, that he that is left in Zion, and he that remaineth in Jerusalem, shall be called holy, even every one that is written among the living in Jerusalem: When the Lord shall have washed away the filth of the daughters of Zion, and shall have purged the blood of Jerusalem from the midst thereof by the spirit of judgment, and the spirit of burning. And the Lord shall create upon every dwelling-place of Mount Zion, and upon all her assemblies, a cloud and a smoke by day, and the shining of a flaming fire by night, for upon all the glory shall be a defence." (Isa. iv.5)

Here the context determines the literal meaning. The Jerusalem spoken of is the same of which it was said just before, "Jerusalem is ruined, and Judah is fallen; because their tongue and their doings are against the Lord to provoke the eyes of His glory" (Isa. iii.8). The daughters of Zion are the same class who have just been so sternly reprov'd for their haughtiness and pride, the daughters of Israel dwelling at Jerusalem. The assemblies of Mount Zion are the same of which it has been declared, "The calling of assemblies I cannot away with: it is iniquity, even the solemn meeting:" (Isa. 1.13) they are the assemblies of Israel for worship in the holy city. The literal sense is, therefore, that Jerusalem then fallen so low should rise from her ruin; that her daughters should be as glorious for purity and meekness as once they were detestable for their pride; that the judgments of God, and the power of His Spirit, shall effect this mighty change; that all the dwellers in Jerusalem shall then be holy without any mixture of the profane; and that a glory, like the pillar of cloud and of fire in the desert, shall then rest, as a sacred token of God's holy presence, upon all the assemblies for solemn worship in Jerusalem.

Again, let us compare Isa. i.7-10 with the opening of chap. lxii., and, on applying the second definition, the sense of the prophecy will be clear. One passage is historical, the other prophetic; one speaks of Zion's glory, the other of her shame; but in other respects they entirely correspond. If we expound the prophecy as the history must be expounded, no doubt can arise upon its meaning. The country which is to receive the name of Beulah, in token of God's peculiar favour, is the same which before had been "desolate and burned with fire" (Isa. i.7), the land of Israel. The daughter of Zion, to whom the high surname is to be given, Hephzibah, "My delight is in her," the Zion for whose brightness and salvation Messiah pleads with unceasing fervour, is the same that was left "as a cottage in a vineyard, and as a besieged city," while the Assyrian invaders were overspreading the land. The figures used in the second place to express the glory of Zion are scarcely stronger than those in the first to express her degradation. Is it said, in imagery of striking beauty, "Thou shalt be a crown of glory in the hand of the Lord, and a royal diadem in the hand of thy god?" A metaphor not less vivid has been used to describe her corruption: "Hear the word of the Lord, ye rulers of Sodom; give ear to the law of our God, ye people of Gomorrah." The same laws of thought by which we interpret the history, enable us without any further strain upon language, or recourse to allegories, to expound the prophecy also.

But there are three main difficulties which have perplexed this subject, and which I must endeavour to remove. These are, the presence of FIGURATIVE TERMS, the SYMBOLICAL nature of some of the PROPHECIES, and the ANALOGICAL or TYPICAL APPLICATIONS of others. The definition of the literal sense which has been already given will furnish us, in every case, with an easy solution.

First, it has often been thought that to advocate the literal sense of prophecy involves the absurd consequence of denying all metaphorical and figurative language. And the strange paradoxes which must be maintained on this view are sometimes urged with an air of triumph, to prove the need for adopting allegorical glosses, and rejecting the literal sense. Specimens of such paradoxes might be multiplied with ease, if it were consistent with due reverence for God's most holy Word. But to all such objections, whether brought forward with flippancy or with seriousness, there is a simple reply. The literal interpretation, rightly understood, does not exclude the admission of figures "wherever the context of itself shows their presence, or wherever we should allow them to exist, if the prophecy were a history of past events."

How beautiful, for instance, is the patriarch's blessing upon his favoured son! "Joseph is a fruitful bough, a fruitful bough by a well, whose branches run over the wall: the archers have sorely grieved him, and shot at him, and hated him: but his bow abode in strength, and the arms of his hands were made strong by the hands of the mighty God of Jacob." (Gen. xlix.22-24.) Let us compare this with the close of the blessing of Moses on the tribe of Joseph. "His glory is as the firstling of his bullock, and his horns are as the horns of unicorns; with them shall he push the people to the ends of the earth; and they are the ten thousands of Ephraim, and the thousands of Manasseh" (Deut. xxxiii.17). In the first, or historical passage, we find it easy to expound the figures, and still to retain their literal application to the sufferings of Joseph and the treachery of his brethren. Why, then, should the metaphors in the words of Moses obscure from us its literal application to the tribe of Joseph? Or why,

because of the presence of figures, should we have recourse to systematic allegory in prophecies of the future more than in histories of the past? The metaphors, in each case, are only a veil beneath which the literal sense is preserved transparent and entire.

THE SYMBOLICAL PROPHECIES, again, have perplexed the minds of many Christians, and obscured from them the evidence for the literal interpretation of the rest. The visions of Daniel and the Apocalypse cannot, it is argued, be taken literally, without gross and glaring absurdity. We cannot suppose that locusts with stings like scorpions are literally to arise out of the abyss, or that a woman literally clothed with the sun has ever appeared, or will appear. Since, then, in these emblems, and many besides, such an interpretation would be absurd, why should we affix a literal meaning to the other prophecies?

But here, too, the difficulty melts away upon a close inspection. For, in truth, in these parts of the word of God we have not a direct and literal prophecy of the future, but only the literal record of a past vision. The Spirit of God makes use of symbols, addressed to the eye and ear of the prophet, as a peculiar language, more adapted than that in common use to convey to us the prediction in the comprehensive fulness of its meaning. We have first of all then, by a literal interpretation, to realize the scenes and objects of the vision; and those scenes themselves then furnish a kind of natural language, which leads simply to the true sense of the prophecy. A literal interpretation is not excluded by the presence of symbols; it is rather implied as the basis and groundwork of their correct exposition. The *record* must be strictly and literally interpreted, before the *vision* can be explained in its full symbolic meaning.

There are, it is true, mingled with these visions, passages directly prophetic, given us by the Holy Spirit as further helps in deciphering the mysterious language of those symbols which he employs. To these, accordingly, the rule of literal interpretation fully applies. The latter part of Dan. ii., vii., viii., the whole of Rev. xvii., and some verses in other chapters, are of this kind. But the peculiar nature of the context leads, in this case, to a slight modification, the nature and reason of which a few words may explain.

If these passages were independent predictions, they ought, for their literal exposition, to be explained just as if they were histories of past events, written in the common language of men. But since they are given as helps to ascertain the meaning of the previous visions, there will be, as in the material world, a kind of reaction upon their own meaning, from the nature of the visions to be explained. The Holy Spirit here employs a double medium of prophecy—the symbolic language of the vision itself, and the common language of the explanatory supplement. The bare fact that both are employed, implies that either would be imperfect if taken alone. The sense, therefore, of each, when doubtful, ought to be fixed by the light which the other supplies. Just as we are to assign that significance to the emblems, which agrees best with the Divine explanation; so, where the explanation itself contains peculiar or ambiguous terms, that meaning ought to be given them which harmonizes best with the Divine emblems. The law of literal interpretation still holds true; the circumstances of its application alone have varied. The symbolic prophecies, far from impeaching its truth, present it in a fresh light, and yield it fuller confirmation.

A third ground of objection or difficulty, has been the FIGURATIVE APPLICATIONS OF PROPHECY IN THE NEW TESTAMENT. Some instances of these clearly exist, though much fewer than is often supposed. Whether we admit or reject the literal sense of Malachi's prediction concerning Elijah (Mal. iv.5), or that in Hosea of the restoration of the ten tribes (Hos. i.10; ii.23), it is plain that our Lord applies the first of these to the Baptist (Matt. xi.14), and that St. Paul quotes the second in connexion with the call of the Gentiles (Rom. ix.24-26). Have we not, then, a sufficient ground for rejecting the literal sense, not only in these passages, but in all those which seem to predict a future glory of Israel?

The fallacy of such a conclusion will be seen by comparing these applications of prophecy with the types in the narrative portions of Scripture. We know, on the authority of St. Paul (Gal. iv.24), that the history of Hagar and Sarah, of Ishmael and Isaac, is to be viewed as a Divine allegory of the two covenants. But what sound interpreter would dream of denying, on this account, the historical truth of that sacred narrative? In the prophet Hosea, again (xi.1), the Lord reminds His people of His mercy to them in their first exodus: "When Israel was a child, then I loved him, and called my son out of Egypt." The Evangelist, however (Matt. ii.15), teaches us to read in this a prophecy of our Saviour's flight into Egypt and of his return to Judea. Yet no one has ever fancied this to be any presumption against the historical certainty of that first exodus of Israel. The rest of Canaan, as the apostle teaches the Hebrew Christians (Heb. iv.), was a shadow and earnest of the true rest which remaineth for God's people. But the entrance of the Jews under Joshua into Canaan is not the less a plain fact of sacred history. What reason have we to adopt a different rule in the case of inspired prophecies? These are only

history written before the event, and the analogical lessons that are entwined with them form no presumption against their literal truth. The events recorded in the books of Genesis and Joshua are undoubted facts, though we have inspired warrant for asserting their typical meaning. Why, then, should we doubt the reality of the future glories of Israel, because they form such expressive emblems of spiritual and heavenly things?

The literal interpretation, therefore, when rightly understood, admits of an intermixture of figurative language, is the true groundwork of symbolic exposition; and consistent with allegorical applications, wherever they can be proved from Scripture itself, and are not perverted, so as to set aside the direct meaning of the prophecy. Let us now proceed, in the second place, TO ESTABLISH ITS TRUTH BY SOME SCRIPTURAL ARGUMENTS.

The first of these we may draw from the words of God to Habakkuk. The command of God is there given to the prophet, "Write the vision, and make it plain upon tables, that he may run that readeth it." We may here adopt the reasoning of our blessed Lord, "Is not the life more than meat, and the body than raiment?" (Matt. vi.25.) As the goodness of God enables us from the greater gift to infer the less, so His wisdom warrants us to infer, where the less is promised, that the greater, without which it would be useless, has already been given. Is it not, then, more important to the Church, that the language of prophecy should be simple, than that its written characters should be large and plain? Would it not be like a mockery, first to clothe it in allegories, the meaning of which no reader, at that time, could possibly divine, and then to charge the prophet about the public manner of its exhibition, or the distinctness of the engraving? Surely these words are of themselves a convincing proof, that the language of God's prophecies, where not expressly sealed, is intelligible and plain; that the only veil is the blindness of our own eyes, and the only seal upon the vision our negligence or unbelief.

Another argument we may gather from the form of the Jewish prophecies, and the manner of their communication. They are publicly addressed to the Jews themselves. They relate to objects and scenes with which they were familiar. They are given as pledges of the Divine goodness, in contrast with their own sin and degradation. They are attended with the charge, even to the carnal Israelites, in various forms--"Believe the prophets of God, and ye shall prosper." They are intermingled with the actual history of that very people, whose future dignity and glory they seem to announce so clearly. They are worded as if to exclude the very possibility of turning them from their natural meaning. "Jerusalem shall be inhabited in her own place, even in Jerusalem." (Zech. xii.6.) The Jews are to be "gathered into their own land, and none of them left any more at all" among the heathen (Ezek. xxxix.28). If God's covenant with day and night should fail, then only shall Israel cease to be a nation before him. (Jer. xxxiii.25,26.) Distinct promises are made to the holy city, to the chosen people, and to the very mountains of Israel. The land that has been "taken up in the lips of talkers" (how striking a description even now!) "shall bear the reproach of the people no more," and "bereave its dwellers no more," but "shoot forth its branches for the people of Israel, who are at hand to come." (See Ezek. xxxvi.) Who can read such passages, and not feel that the Spirit of God has hedged round His predictions with a sacred fence against every attempt to distort them from their simple and literal meaning?

The conduct of the apostles, and the reproofs addressed to them by our Lord, are a further evidence of the same truth. Many times are they reprov'd for not receiving a prophecy in its literal sense, never once for so receiving it. They plainly understood the promises made to Israel in this literal manner, but for this our Lord never blames them. His censures are all aimed against their unbelief of other statements, equally plain, of Messiah's sufferings. Such was the rebuke on the way to Emmaus, "O fools, and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken." (Luke xxiv. 25.) However chargeable with dulness in other respects, here they are not charged with being dull to understand, but slow to *believe*. It was with them as with Christians now. Some sayings of the prophets pleased their taste, or tallied with their system, but others were of an opposite kind. They chose out, therefore, which they would believe, and tropes and figures served them doubtless to explain the rest.

A fourth and most convincing argument for the literal interpretation may be found in the past history of the Jews. The threatenings pronounced against them have been strictly fulfilled; then so must the promises be also. Out of many examples, let us choose one only from the prophecy of Micah. There, reproving the sins of the Jewish rulers, the Lord thus pleads with them by the prophet: "Yet will they lean upon the Lord, and say, Is not the Lord among us? none evil can come upon us. Therefore shall Zion for your sake be plowed as a field, and Jerusalem shall become heaps, and the mountain of the house as the high places of the forest. But in the last days it shall come to pass, that the mountain of the house of the Lord shall be established on the top of the mountains, and be exalted above the hills; and all nations shall flow unto it." (Micah iii.11,12; iv.1.)

The warning in the first part of this passage has been literally accomplished; many now in England have witnessed it with their own eyes. Why should we doubt the literal fulfilment of the rest? Will the Most High God perform His threatenings to the letter, and not fulfil His promises also? Shall the burden of a special curse, because clearly denounced, rest in its full weight upon the unbelieving Jews, and shall not repentant Israel enjoy in all its speciality and fulness the promised blessing? Every suffering, indeed, of the Jews in their long dispersion, is a token of God's righteous anger for this rejection of His own Son. But, blessed be His holy name, it is more. It is a lively pledge that the predictions of coming mercy in their restoration, and conversion, and royal dignity, shall also be visibly accomplished in the sight of men. Indeed that style of interpretation which leaves all the curses in their full weight upon the Jewish nation, and then transfers all the blessings by a figure to the Gentile Church, is no spiritual service to God, but an unrighteous perversion of the truth. The Lord Himself seems to mark it with the brand of his severe displeasure, where he declares in connexion with this very subject, "I hate robbery for burnt offering." (Isa. lxi.8.)

The last evidence I shall now adduce, and perhaps the most impressive of all, is the literal fulfilment of so many prophecies in the person of our blessed Lord. None could be more strange and wonderful than these; none to a merely natural judgment more unlikely to come to pass. The words of St. Peter, before the events took place, had a fair show of reason: "Be it far from Thee, Lord; this shall not be unto Thee." (Matt. xvi.22). Yet how fully were they all accomplished! The sign which the Lord gave unto Ahaz was truly "in the height above, and in the depth beneath," but it was strictly accomplished: "The virgin shall conceive, and shall bear a son, and they shall call His name Immanuel." (Isa. vii.10,11,14.) The voice of the Baptist was heard in the wilderness of Judah, to "prepare the way of the Lord, and to make His path straight." (Luke iii.4.) The Lord, the messenger of the covenant, came suddenly to His temple. (Mal. iii.1.) Glad tidings were preached to the poor. The eternal Son of God, who "clothes the heavens with blackness, and makes sackcloth their covering," "gave His back to the smiters, and His cheeks to them that plucked off the hair; He hid not His face from shame and spitting." (Isa. l.3,5,6.) The King came unto Zion, "meek and lowly, sitting on an ass, and a colt the foal of an ass." (Zech. ix.9.) "His own familiar friend, who did eat of His bread," (Ps. xli.9), laid wait for Him, and betrayed Him to His enemies. The "Shepherd was smitten, and the sheep were scattered abroad." Zech. xiii.7.) They pierced His hands and His feet; they gave Him gall to eat; and in his thirst they gave Him vinegar to drink; they parted His garments among them, and cast lots upon His vesture. (Ps. lxxix.21; xxii.16,18.) He was brought to the grave with the wicked, and was with the rich man in His death, and was numbered with the transgressors. (Isa. liii.9,12.) but the Holy One of God saw no corruption. He rose from the dead, and the path of life was open before Him into the presence of his heavenly Father. He ascended on high, He led captivity captive, and received gifts for men. (Ps. xvi.10,11; lxxviii.18.) And when the work of atonement was complete, and the heavenly Intercessor was provided, and the Spirit was poured from on high, the promise of His Father was at length fulfilled. "I will also give Thee for a light to the Gentiles, that Thou mayest be My salvation unto the ends of the earth." (Isa. lxxix.6.)

But this proof, drawn from the literal accomplishment of so many prophecies in the person of our Saviour, becomes still more impressive from the manner in which our Lord Himself, time after time, alludes to that fulfilment. He seeks earnestly to show us that His obedience was to magnify, not only the law, but also the prophecies of God. It is in the most solemn scenes of His history that these passages occur. At the transfiguration "he answered and told them, how it was written of the Son of man, that He must suffer many things and be set at nought." (Mark ix.12.) At His last approach to Jerusalem He took unto Him the twelve, and said unto them, "Behold we go up to Jerusalem, and all things that are written in the prophets concerning the Son of man shall be accomplished." (Luke xviii.31.) At the last supper He repeats the allusion with a solemn addition--"The Son of man goeth indeed, as it is written of Him, but woe unto that man by whom He is betrayed." (Mark xiv.21.) On the verge of His bitter agony, the statement is repeated with a fuller emphasis than ever: "For I say unto you, that this which is written must yet be accomplished in me, And He was reckoned among the transgressors; for even the things which concern Me have their fulfilment." (Luke xxii.37, comp. Greek text.) This, too, is the cause why in the hour of treachery and darkness He refuses to summon willing legions to His aid--"Thinkest thou that I cannot now pray to my Father, and He shall presently give Me more than twelve legions of angels? But how then shall the Scriptures be fulfilled, that thus it must be!" (Matt. xxvi.54.) Nay, even on the cross itself, the Holy Spirit reveals to us the thoughts of the Saviour in His latest agony, and they are still occupied with the same truth: "Jesus knowing that all things were now accomplished, that the Scripture might be fulfilled, saith, I thirst." (John xix.28.)

What a solemn lesson do these various passages convey! Sooner than the literal sense of the prophecies should fail, the eternal Son of God stoops cheerfully to shame, to bitter agony, to the death of the cross! His awful sufferings are endured, not more to accomplish our redemption, than to fulfil in the letter the

predictions of God's word, and to maintain unsullied and spotless the veracity of His heavenly Father. Well might St. Paul declare, that "Jesus Christ was a minister of the circumcision *for the truth of God*, to confirm the promises made unto the fathers." (Rom. xv.8.) And can we, or even dare we, any longer doubt the literal accomplishment, in due season, of all God's prophecies, when it is thus solemnly assured to us by the blood of that Divine and glorious sacrifice, which seals to us the covenant of our own salvation?

These arguments for the literal interpretation of prophecy might easily be multiplied and enlarged. But it may be more useful to expose shortly some objections arising from false methods of exposition, which have hindered the reception of its true and simple meaning.

There are two main schools of interpretation, flatly opposed to each other, and which both diverge from the truth, the neological, and the mystical or allegorical. The first is based on the type of the Cerinthian heresy; the second on that of the Gnostic delusion. The first robs the Divine prophecies of their heavenly, the other of their earthly element. The one debases them from their high dignity, to crush them within the passing events of a day; the other unmoors them from all the anchor-hold of time and place, and changes their intense and manifest reality into a vague and mysterious dream. On the first of these it is not needful to dwell, but as the second still prevails in the Church, it may be well to notice some of the objections to which it has given rise.

It has been alleged then, first, on the presumed warrant of some passages in the New Testament, that the title of Jew and the name of Israel belong properly only to true believers in Christ. Thus St. Paul tells us, that "he is not a Jew, which is one outwardly; but he is a Jew, which is one inwardly (Rom. ii.28); that "all are not Israel, which are of Israel" (Rom. ix.6); and applies the title of "the Israel of God" to those which walk according to the rule of Christ (Gal. vi.16).

A close attention to the scope and context of these passages will dissolve the whole objection. The apostle proves to the unbelieving Jews that their descent from Abraham, cannot alone avail them for salvation without faith in Jesus Christ. He admits a hidden and higher sense in the name of Jew; that he is one who receives praise from God (Rom. ii.29), and who offers praise to God (Gen. xxix.35). He argues that their natural descent cannot profit them, without this inward character graven on the heart by God's Holy Spirit. But he nowhere teaches that the name of Jew, either in history or in prophecy, is to be commonly taken in this peculiar sense. Nay, in every case the Holy Spirit seems, in the context, to guard us expressly against this mistake. Thus, in the first passage it is added in the very next verse: "What advantage then hath the Jew? or what profit is there of circumcision?" (Rom. iii.1), and in the second, after a few verses: "Israel, which followed after the law of righteousness, hath not attained to the law of righteousness." (Rom. ix.31.) And again, when in writing to the Galatians, he gives the name of Israel to Christian believers; it is only after first describing their new creation in Christ Jesus (Gal. iii.15), and with the emphatic addition "the Israel of God," to denote those who are in the actual enjoyment of the Divine favour. But where there is no special mark of deviation from the usual sense, the constant use of the terms, Jew, Israel, Zion, and Jerusalem, in the New Testament writers, instead of disproving their literal meaning in the Prophets of the Old Testament, fully ratifies and confirms it.

Again it is alleged, secondly, that since the coming of Christ all distinction of Jew and Gentile in spiritual things is at an end, and hence, that no prophecies of special glory to the Jew can hereafter be literally fulfilled. So again, St. Paul declares, that "there is no difference of Jew nor Greek" (Rom. x.12); that "the middle wall of partition is broken down" (Eph. ii.14); that in Christ "there is neither Greek nor Jew, circumcision nor uncircumcision, but all are one in Christ Jesus" (Col. ii.11). And that those who are Christ's are "Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise." (Gal. iii.29.)

These texts, when viewed in their real connexion, are not more conclusive than the former. It is only when read superficially that they seem to clash with the Jewish prophecies. "There is no difference," it is true, "between the Jew and the Greek" in the full and free provision of grace in Jesus Christ, and in the way of attaining salvation by faith in Him--"for the same Lord over all is rich unto all that call upon Him." (Rom. x.12.) But in the actual measure of faith, in the sovereign dispensation of the gifts of God, in the privilege of visible adoption into the covenant, and the honour which flows from that privilege, there may be, and has been, and is even now, the greatest variety. The Jews, therefore, who, since their rejection, have been the lowest in gospel privileges, and many of them under a sentence of judicial blindness, may yet become, in God's goodness, the highest and the first. "The middle wall of partition" is broken down, which shut out the Gentiles from the temple of God; but yet, within the temple itself, there is an outer and an inner court, and various degrees of privilege and of glory. There is nothing therefore in these passages really inconsistent with a large pre-eminence of Israel in times to come.

The last and most important objection is, the supposed earthly, gross, and carnal character of the literal interpretation. This idea repels many Christians from the subject, and makes them view it as a snare and hindrance rather than a help to the soul. Hence also the title, "spiritual," is often given to the figurative mode of exposition. Let us examine then, by a few plain tests, to which that high title justly belongs.

First, The truly spiritual interpretation is that which calls Faith into the liveliest exercise. For Faith is the nurse and mother of every Christian grace, the inlet of all spiritual life to the soul. To which of these two modes of exposition does this character apply? To that pliant and easy method which receives in the letter whatever accords with our Gentile taste, or chimes in with our favourite system, or falls with a curse on the devoted head of the Jew; and then turns the rest into an allegory to be moulded at our will? Surely it applies much rather to the literal exposition. For this calls us to the docility of a little child. It bids us cast away our high imaginations, and bring every thought captive to the obedience of Christ, by receiving His messages in their simplest and plainest sense. It commands us, in short, to break down the pride of human systems, and to sacrifice our dearest prejudice, rather than to do violence to one jot or tittle of the Word of God.

Secondly, An interpretation is spiritual, in proportion as it illustrates the harmony and glory of the Divine attributes. In which exposition is this feature most conspicuous? In the literal, which rests simply on God's veracity, and shows His truth alike displayed in the desolation and the recovery of Israel;--and not His truth only, but the depths of his long-suffering, and the perseverance of His love, and the triumph of His grace, and the riches of His boundless wisdom? Or in the figurative, which is based chiefly on the ingenuity of man; which represents the God of truth as fulfilling His threatenings in the letter, but provides an excuse why His promises need not be so fulfilled; and thus destroys the balanced harmony of righteousness and grace, in the providence of the Most High towards the sons of Israel? On the literal view of prophecy, though grievous darkness has rested on the outcast race for two thousand years, the bow of the covenant, bright with hope, is seen still shining over them. On the other view the arch is broken and disappears, and nothing remains of its loveliness but the dark cloud of vengeance.

Again, That interpretation is most spiritual, which magnifies most the truth and preciousness of God's holy word. For this is the grand instrument of our salvation, and God has magnified His word above all his name. But the figurative exposition turns all the prophetic portion into an enigma, which but few can understand, and which must be useless to all others; it first covers the prospect with a deep mist, and then dissuades from further search as unnecessary and even dangerous. While, on the other hand, the literal interpretation leaves it open to our view, just as the Spirit of God has spread it before us, a land of promise, goodly to the eye, with all the rich and varied beauty of earth, and with all the blessed light and purity of heaven.

Lastly, The spiritual interpretation is that which uproots selfishness from the heart, and enthrones on its ruins the love of Christ, and the love of our brethren. But by the figurative interpretation, the Gentile Church is taught to appropriate solely to herself all the promises of God, where Israel, Judah, and Jerusalem are most clearly addressed; regardless of the wrong done to the outcasts of Zion, and of the dark cloud which is thus brought over that glorious attribute of her Lord, His truth and faithfulness. On the other hand, the literal interpretation leads us to rejoice, with a pure and unselfish joy, in the fulness of God's love to His ancient people. It calls us, as Gentile Christians, to be willing ourselves to decrease, if only the faithfulness of our Lord may be vindicated and His glory increased; and our own heart's desire and prayer be fulfilled in the salvation of Israel.

I have thus shown the full warrant which God has given to His Church for the literal interpretation of prophecy, from His own express command, from the nature of the prophecies themselves, from the conduct of the apostles, the history of the Jewish nation, and from the solemn and repeated declarations of the Lord Jesus. I have shown its consistency with the statements of the Apostle of the Gentiles, and its peculiar claim, above every other, to the title of a spiritual interpretation.