

## Prophecy and literalism

by Douglas E. Cox

Isaiah said that God speaks to us with "stammering lips and another tongue."

Isaiah 28:9-11

Whom shall he teach knowledge? and whom shall he make to understand doctrine? them that are weaned from the milk, and drawn from the breasts. For precept must be upon precept, precept upon precept; line upon line, line upon line; here a little, and there a little: For with stammering lips and another tongue will he speak to this people.

"Stammering lips" conveys the idea that the revelations of God are given over long spans of time. Understanding Old Testament prophecy requires a New Testament perspective. In 1 Peter 1:12, the apostle Peter said the prophets ministered not unto themselves, but "unto us," meaning the Church.

"Another tongue" means that the language of prophecy is not plain speech. It is the language of parable, metaphor, and "similitudes," and so it requires interpretation, or translation. Hosea wrote:

Hosea 12:10

I have also spoken by the prophets, and I have multiplied *visions*, and used *similitudes*, by the ministry of the prophets.

No Scripture says prophecy must be taken literally, or that it is plain speech.

The Olivet Discourse is prophecy, and in it, Jesus used the language of the prophets.

Isaiah wrote:

Isaiah 2:1-2

The word that Isaiah the son of Amoz saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem. And it

shall come to pass in the last days, that the mountain of the Lord's house shall be established in the top of the mountains, and shall be exalted above the hills; and all nations shall flow unto it.

Isaiah's prophecy about Judah and Jerusalem was fulfilled when Jesus ascended to heaven, and to the throne of his Father. The mountain of the Lord's house represents Jesus, God's only begotten son. After his resurrection, Jesus was made Christ by his Father, and He reigns forever in the throne of David, in the heavenly Jerusalem. At Pentecost, when the holy Spirit was given to the disciples, Judah and Jerusalem became heavenly, and spiritual. Since that time, Old Testament prophecies about Jerusalem and mount Zion refer to the heavenly city.

The apostle Peter warned the Jews that all those of Israel who reject Jesus Christ will be "destroyed from among the people." [Acts 3:22-23] They are no longer *Israel*.

Jesus is king of the Jews, and when he spoke of "them which be in Judea" in his Olivet Discourse, he was not referring to ethnic Jews, but to those who are in his kingdom, the Church, and the heavenly Jerusalem.

Jesus called Jerusalem "the city of the great King." He said:

Matthew 5:34-35

But I say unto you, Swear not at all; neither by heaven; for it is God's throne: Nor by the earth; for it is his footstool: neither by Jerusalem; for it is the city of the great King.

Jesus also said, "Salvation is of the Jews." [John 4:22] In his Olivet Discourse, Jesus refers to those who are in his kingdom as Jews. The saints are Jews in a spiritual sense. He said:

Matthew 24:14-16

And this gospel of the kingdom shall be preached in all the world for a witness unto all nations; and then shall the end come. When ye therefore shall see the abomination of desolation, spoken of by Daniel the prophet, stand in the holy place, (whoso readeth, let him understand:) Then let them which be in Judaea flee into the mountains:

Jesus did not mean flee to save your life, because he also said:

Matthew 16:25

For whosoever will save his life shall lose it: and whosoever will lose his life for my sake shall find it.

The mountains that he meant we should flee to are not literal mountains, but symbols of God's promises to his Church. Recognizing the "abomination of desolation" refers to the time when false teachings that have made the church desolate are exposed. Jesus promised that the Spirit will guide the Church into all truth. [John 16:13] That is when prophecy will be understood, and when the holy Spirit is poured out on the Church. That is why Jesus said, "flee to the mountains." The mountains are metaphors, and symbols of God's promises, revelations, prophecies, and covenants. For example, Sinai represents the Mosaic covenant in Galatians 4:24-26. Christ's kingdom is a mountain that will fill the whole earth in Daniel 2:35.

Jesus said:

Matthew 24:17-19

Let him which is on the housetop not come down to take any thing out of his house:  
Neither let him which is in the field return back to take his clothes.

Houses in New Testament times had flat roofs, and people communicated with their neighbours upon housetops. Jesus said to his disciples:

Matthew 10:27

What I tell you in darkness, that speak ye in light: and what ye hear in the ear, that preach ye upon the housetops.

Those who are on the housetops represent people who spread the Gospel. Jesus warned them not to come down to take anything out of their houses, meaning do not bring up old, flawed doctrines and interpretations, and theories, when Jesus reveals new light, and knowledge, and understanding.

Those who are in the field represent those who labour for the Gospel; they are "labourers in his harvest." Jesus referred to them here:

Matthew 9:37-38

Then saith he unto his disciples, The harvest truly is plenteous, but the labourers are few; Pray ye therefore the Lord of the harvest, that he will send forth labourers into his harvest.

Clothing in prophecy represents spiritual knowledge and understanding. Paul wrote: "Stand therefore, having your loins girt about with truth, and having on the breastplate of righteousness." [Eph. 6:14]

In Revelation 16:15 Jesus said: "Behold, I come as a thief. Blessed is he that watcheth, and keepeth his garments, lest he walk naked, and they see his shame."

Jesus warns his saints, when He provides his Church with new "clothes," or understanding, not to cling to their old ones.

Jesus said: "And woe unto them that are with child, and to them that give suck in those days!" [Matthew 24:19]

I doubt that this saying refers to pregnant women and nursing mothers! But it may apply to teachers and ministers; Paul described himself as a "mother" travailing in birth. He said to the Galatians:

Galatians 4:19

My little children, of whom I travail in birth again until Christ be formed in you, I desire to be present with you now, and to change my voice; for I stand in doubt of you.

Isaiah said,

Isaiah 28:9

Whom shall he teach knowledge? and whom shall he make to understand doctrine? them that are weaned from the milk, and drawn from the breasts.

Taking a literal approach to interpreting prophecy is like living on a diet consisting of *milk*, which is an excellent food for infants, who have no teeth, as no chewing is required. But Isaiah said those who are taught by God have been “weaned from the milk, and drawn from the breasts.” Saints who are mature can handle foods stronger than “milk.”

The author of Hebrews wrote:

Hebrews 5:12-13

For when for the time ye ought to be teachers, ye have need that one teach you again which be the first principles of the oracles of God; and are become such as have need of milk, and not of strong meat. For every one that useth milk is unskilful in the word of righteousness: for he is a babe.

Those who “give suck,” I suggest, are those who present only a literal view of prophecy, neglecting to interpret the symbols according to the principles revealed in the Scriptures. Jesus said:

Luke 21:36

But pray ye that your flight be not in the winter, neither on the sabbath day:” [Matthew 24:20] The meaning of this verse is similar to Jesus’ warning in Luke: “Watch ye therefore, and pray always, that ye may be accounted worthy to escape all these things that shall come to pass, and to stand before the Son of man.

Jesus referred to the present age as “summer,” as it is the time for producing fruit for the harvest at the end of the age. Jesus said:

Matthew 24:32-33

Now learn a parable of the fig tree; When his branch is yet tender, and putteth forth leaves, ye know that summer is nigh: So likewise ye, when ye shall see all these things, know that it is near, even at the doors.

To have to flee in the winter means one has missed out on the harvest, and was “left behind.” Such people must endure the “winter” of the judgment.

The sabbath day represents the time when the saints who were worthy have entered into their promised “rest.” Jesus said:

Matthew 24:21

For then shall be great tribulation, such as was not since the beginning of the world to this time, no, nor ever shall be.