

THE FATHERS ON THE FUTURE

A 2nd-Century Eschatology for the
21st-Century Church

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Go Deeper Excursus 10

What Are We Seeing in Old Testament Prophecy: Fantasy, Photo, or Figure?

When approaching the poetic and figurative language of the Old Testament prophets, where do we draw the line between symbol and reality, between literal and figurative? This problem becomes acute when we consider the nature of much of the Old Testament’s prophecies of the coming kingdom. In his book, *Plowshares and Pruning Hooks*, Sandy observes, “The very nature of prophetic language, which gives it power, makes it challenging. Prophecy is usually poetry, and it has all the features of Hebrew poetry. Rather than the straightforward language of propositions, it communicates in emotive, hyperbolic and figurative ways.”¹ Sandy provides some important correctives to over-literalizing, over-reading, and asking questions the authors may not intend to answer. However, he asserts repeatedly that the Bible contains “powerful language designed for dramatic impact on its hearers.”²

But what do we do with all the details? How should we read these symbols if not literally? In short, when we read the Old Testament prophecies of the coming kingdom, what, exactly, are we looking at? At the risk of oversimplification—but for the purpose of clarity—let me suggest three possible answers to this question, which lie on a spectrum: the *fantastic*, the *figurative*, or the *photographic*, with mediating positions between.³

FANTASTIC FIGURATIVE PHOTOGRAPHIC

¹ D. Brent Sandy, *Plowshares and Pruning Hooks: Rethinking the Language of Biblical Prophecy and Apocalyptic* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2002), 195–196.

² Sandy, *Plowshares and Pruning Hooks*, 198.

³ These roughly correspond with Oswalt’s distinctions between “literalistic” (photographic), “spiritualistic” (fantastic), and “figurative” (figurative). See his comments on Isaiah 11:6–9 in John N. Oswalt, *The Book of Isaiah, Chapters 1–39*, *The New International Commentary on the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986), 283.

Fantastic. This approach views the events and descriptions in the poetic prophetic language as having primarily an affective purpose: to stir the reader of the prophet’s day to particular feelings of hope, awe, joy, transcendence, faith, fear, sorrow, repentance, etc. The language and imagery have no actual referents to anything real on the timeline of unfolding history. To use our image of “plowshares and pruning hooks,” the “fantastic” approach would see this as presenting an ideal we should strive for, usually applied as a spiritual disposition or moral principle. For instance, Calvin comments on Isaiah 2:4, “He meant that Christ makes such a reconciliation between God and men, that a comfortable state of peace exists among themselves, by putting an end to destructive wars....When the gospel shall be published, it will be an excellent remedy for putting an end to quarrels; and not only so, but that, when resentments have been laid aside, men will be disposed to assist each other.”⁴ The purpose of the image, then, is to move people to exchange warfare for peace, to submit to the rule of God in their own lives.⁵

Regarding a vision or prophecy as “fantastic” does not mean the same thing as “false” or even “fictional.” Just as Tolkien’s epic *The Lord of the Rings* takes place in a fantasy world, the story and characters are infused with deeper meaning that reflects spiritual truths. And C. S. Lewis’s *Chronicles of Narnia* present Christian themes in a world of fantasy. So, “fantastic” can be used to illustrate spiritual, moral realities in imaginative and impactful ways. Yet neither Tolkien’s Middle Earth nor Lewis’s Narnia have actual referents in the real world—past, present, or future. In this way, a “fantastic” approach to the poetic prophecies or apocalyptic visions of the Old Testament emphasizes their allegorical character—they are vehicles to illustrate spiritual or ethical truths and to move people to faith, hope, and love rather than to reveal events that will actually take place in the future.

Photographic. Swinging to the opposite end of the spectrum, this approach takes the language quite literally. This is sometimes popularly expressed with the basic rule of interpretation: “When the literal sense of Scripture makes good sense, seek no other sense.”⁶ When the text says, “The mountain of the Lord’s house shall be established as the highest of the mountains and shall be raised above the hills” (Isa 2:2), we should expect a major geological event that causes the Temple Mount in Jerusalem to rise until its elevation exceeds the surrounding hills. In a study on the miraculous in Isaiah, Goldingay asserts, “The elevation upon which Yahweh’s house stands is

⁴ John Calvin, *Commentary on the Book of the Prophet Isaiah*, vol. 1, trans. William Pringle (Bellingham, WA: Logos, 2010), 100–101.

⁵ This seems to be the emphasis in Sandy’s reading of Old Testament prophecy (Sandy, *Plowshares and Pruning Hooks*, 200–203). However, Sandy also insists on an actual new creation and restoration at the return of Christ, though many of the Old Testament restoration passages are not necessarily presenting details of that time of restoration except in the most general sense (Sandy, *Plowshares and Pruning Hooks*, 205).

⁶ Ron Rhodes, *The Popular Dictionary of Bible Prophecy* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House, 2010), 16. This “golden rule of interpretation” is repeated, in various forms, quite broadly in especially popular-level publications on end-times prophecy. As a basic “rule of thumb,” it is not objectionable; the problem is determining where the line is between “good sense” and “nonsense” is not always easy. To some people, lions eating straw like an ox makes good sense; to other this is nonsense.

not impressive; it is merely the highest point on a small outcrop that is a mile long and a quarter of a mile wide.... That this so-called mountain should be established as the highest of the mountains and raised above the hills would indeed be a miracle.”⁷ Goldingay acknowledges, though, that “Isaiah need not have such a geographical transformation in mind,” but also concludes, “There is a miracle, then, in the elevation of the temple hill.”⁸ Those who do suggest the possibility of a literal fulfillment of such a passage almost always do so tentatively. For example, Constable suggests that Isaiah “may have meant that the actual mountain on which the temple stood would be thrust higher in elevation. This may happen (cf. Ezek. 40:2; Zech. 14:4, 10), but the primary meaning seems to be that Israel and Yahweh will be exalted in the world.”⁹

In the literary world, a “photographic” approach would be like a historically accurate description of people and events. Imagine if an eminent expert in the history of the Middle Ages wrote a detailed and truthful account of the rise of the Holy Roman Empire and the power of the Papacy up to the eve of the Reformation (c. AD 800–1500). Now imagine that book somehow fell backward through time to the year AD 500. The book would set forth the future history in a way that corresponds with reality in language intended to be taken at face value. In its most extreme form, this would be how a “photographic” approach to the language and imagery of vision and prophecy would function. It would be as if a window opened in the fabric of time and space. Isaiah, Jeremiah, Daniel, and the other prophets simply peered forward to see the events take place, then they simply wrote down what they saw in the best language they had.

It is important to point out that almost no credentialed commentator approaches Old Testament prophets in such a woodenly literal way with complete consistency. The “photographic” approach is sometimes seen in isolated instances, often by readers inexperienced with the way prophetic language and imagery actually work in Scripture. However, “photographic” does mark the theoretical “extreme” end of the spectrum of approaches.

Figurative. Regarding the use of figurative language in apocalyptic literature, Richard Taylor notes, “Biblical writers make extensive use of symbolism and figurative language in apocalyptic literature.... However, figurative language is limited in the degree to which it corresponds to reality.... By pressing such language in an overly literal fashion it is possible to miss a writer’s point or misrepresent him entirely. The language of symbolism can lose its effectiveness and become a playground for interpretational gymnastics that wind up distorting rather than illumining the

⁷ John Goldingay, *Miracle in Isaiah: Divine Marvel and Prophetic Word* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2022), 210–11.

⁸ Goldingay, *Miracle in Isaiah*, 211, 212. Even Goldingay, in his commentary on Isaiah acknowledges that the language of Isa 2:2 “presumably does not predict a geophysical transformation of the Judean mountain ridge. But that is what happens in this vision, which envisages a time when nations will stream to it” (John Goldingay, *Isaiah*, Understanding the Bible Commentary Series (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2012), 43.

⁹ Thomas L. Constable, *Notes on Isaiah*, 2023 ed., 35. PDF available at <https://planobiblechapel.org/tcon/notes/pdf/isaiah.pdf>.

text.”¹⁰ Though Taylor’s warning was intended for literature in the apocalyptic genre, it also applies generally to the symbolic and figurative language employed in poetry and prophetic oracles.¹¹

Approaching the language and imagery as “figurative” acknowledges that symbolic imagery or metaphorical language is employed not merely to impress upon people lofty heavenly realities or simply to point to spiritual or moral principles (though they do also accomplish these things). Rather, the primary referents for the figurative language are events that will take place in the future. I say “primary” because this approach also allows for spiritual and moral application of the future events to the lives of believers past and present, but that application is not the primary aim of the text. The primary aim is to paint a stylized picture of the future. Just as an impressionist painting, like a scene from Monet’s garden, portrays an actual place in the real world, so also the poetic, figurative language of the prophet portrays actual events that will take place in the real world. Yet unlike a photo, the presentation is idealized, painted in broad strokes, and intended to give an accurate though imprecise picture of reality.

In this approach—by far the most common among commentators of every theological stripe—the language of the prophet is understood as “picturesque.”¹² Unlike the “photographic” approach, the “figurative” does not see a strict *one-to-one* correspondence between the picture and the reality. However, unlike the “fantastic” approach, the “figurative” does see a *meaningful* correspondence between the symbolic vision or prophetic language and reality. That is, the language and imagery of the vision or prophecy refer to real future people, events, and conditions that will occur in this world. Then, based on that prophecy of future events, the original audience—and, in fact, all readers subsequent to the prophecy but prior to its fulfillment—are intended to draw spiritual application to strengthen faith, hope, and love.

With regard to the exaltation of the mountain of the Lord’s house above all mountains (Isa 2:2), McConville writes:

In mundane reality, the Temple Mount is not very high, not even as high as the Mount of Olives on its eastern side.... But in this linguistic sphere, the language of height is used to proclaim preeminence. The point is illustrated in Ps. 48:2 [3], where the “holy mountain” is “beautiful in elevation”.... In the same psalm, Zion is located in “the far reaches of the north,” which is also not the case in a mundane sense but taps into notions of the divine dwelling place in the wider religious environment. Isaiah, like the psalms writers, adopts

¹⁰ Richard A. Taylor, *Interpreting Apocalyptic Literature: An Exegetical Handbook*, Handbooks for Old Testament Exegesis, ed. David M. Howard Jr. (Grand Rapids: Kregel Academic, 2016), 126–27.

¹¹ See brief discussion on the relationship between Old Testament prophetic literature and apocalyptic literature in Taylor, *Interpreting Apocalyptic Literature*, 196–200.

¹² Ivan D. Friesen, *Isaiah*, Believers Church Bible Commentary (Scottsdale, PA: Herald, 2009), 39. With regard to literary figures and motifs employed in the prophets the *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery* notes, “Whether using strictly prose or poetry, the prophet wrote in such a heightened speech and urgency of tone and message that the result yielded a literary expressiveness that can be termed ‘poetic.’ Accordingly, one is not surprised to find the free use of many of the literary features and rich imagery common to poetry” (Leland Ryken, James C. Wilhoit, and Tremper Longman III, eds., *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery* [Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1998], 669).

language about God that has kinship with the religious language in his wider world to proclaim the unique exaltation of Yahweh.¹³

Of course, the prophets sometimes do present quite literal prophecies in which the language corresponds directly with the fulfillment. When Micah 5:2 says, “But you, O Bethlehem of Ephrathah, who are one of the little clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to rule in Israel, whose origin is from of old, from ancient days,” the town “Bethlehem” refers to the actual town with that name; and the ruler whose origin is from of old, the Messiah, will literally come forth from that town (Matt 2:1–6).

In the end, we must take care to avoid the two extremes of uncritically viewing the language of the Old Testament prophets as an exact “photo” of future events or as a vague “fantasy” of spiritual truths unconnected to the future. Rather, what we are “seeing” in the prophetic literature of the Old Testament is most often a stylized, picturesque “figure” of real events, sometimes using poetic or abstract imagery, but always pointing to real future conditions. How literally or figuratively we take particular words and images must be determined by context, usage in Scripture, and how the language would likely have been understood at the time. Also, we must take into consideration how clearer passages address similar future events and conditions and the overarching narrative of Scripture.

Richard Taylor presents a balanced approach to “apocalyptic” literature and its interpretation—an approach that can also be applied to prophetic oracles that use figures of speech and symbolism. He summarizes these in six guidelines to embrace: 1) “Pay close attention to grammatical details found in the original language”; 2) “Give attention to issues of genre”; 3) “Isolate the explanatory clues that are often embedded in apocalyptic texts”; 4) “Focus on macrostructure of apocalyptic texts and avoid getting bogged down in microscopic details”; 5) “Avoid reading into figurative language more than was intended by the author”; 6) “Respect the silence of the text.”¹⁴

¹³ J. Gordon McConville, *Isaiah*, Baker Commentary on the Old Testament Prophetic Books, ed. Mark J. Boda and J. Gordon McConville (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2023).

¹⁴ Taylor, *Interpreting Apocalyptic Literature*, 131–132.