

› 9 ‹ *Prophetic License*

Many times in Scripture, when God warns of punishment for sin he does so in a rather mundane fashion. The Bible simply says don't do a certain thing or you will be punished. Later, when sin is pointed out and the warning is repeated, it is given additional force through the use of metaphor and other "exaggerated"⁸⁸ language. This is often

88 One of the most obvious characteristics of prophetic language is the use of symbolism: hyperbole, metaphor and simile. The figures of speech found in both legal and messianic prophetic language should not be taken literally and must be understood in the context provided by the Bible itself. Metaphorical language and literal language are often employed in the same breath so to speak. For instance in Psalm 22 we encounter a prophecy concerning the crucifixion of Jesus Christ. In verse 16 we read: "For dogs have surrounded Me; the congregation of the wicked has enclosed Me. They pierced My hands and My feet." Now, it is clear enough that the enemies of Christ are called dogs - metaphorical language used to show disdain for the enemies of the Messiah. In Jewish culture dogs were considered to be something like vermin and were not by any means a popular pet as they are now. To call someone a dog was an insult: male homosexual prostitutes were called "dogs" (Deuteronomy. 23:18).

It is equally clear that the hands and feet of Jesus were literally pierced by those "dogs." This same Psalm also calls the enemies of Jesus "bulls of Bashan" (metaphor), and predicts the division of Christ's clothing including the casting of the lot (literal). Just one example of a legal prophecy that uses metaphorical and literal language together may be found in Ezekiel 16. Here we see Ezekiel using the metaphor of an adulterous wife to describe Judah and Jerusalem (vs 15 and ff). After graphically describing the sin of apostasy in metaphorical terms, Ezekiel describes the judgment that Jerusalem could expect, again in metaphor - except that he also mixes into the middle of his figurative language a very literal description of what actually happened. In verse 41 he says: "They shall burn your houses with fire and execute judgments on you in the sight of many women; and I will make you cease playing the harlot, and you will no longer have higher lovers." The "they" here refers to

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the product of the personalities God chose to deliver his message. Like an artist painting a landscape, God used many different types of “brushes” to get his point across - with each brush providing a certain character to the canvas. More than simply choosing a brush or spokesman at random, God formed and fashioned their personalities so the texture they brought to the landscape was not in any way a chance happening. In short, the figurative language used by a prophet was at the same time a reflection of his personality and the sovereign control of God.⁸⁹ Indeed, verbal inspiration depends upon

the Babylonians and they did in fact burn the houses of Jerusalem (2 Chronicles 36:19, Jeremiah 39:8). It is important to note that the figures of speech which we find in prophetic language are carefully chosen for their biblically defined symbolic meanings “(A)s with other material we must try to understand the metaphors and symbols in historical and canonical context. Symbols are highly adaptable and easily subject to myriads of different interpretations. The only controls available are first, to ask what the symbols would have meant to the author and his audience, and second, to ask how a symbol functions in the Bible as a whole” (McCartney and Clayton, 220.)

For example, the “bulls of Bashan” mentioned in Psalm 22 have specific symbolic meaning; God was not simply using metaphorical language for the sake of entertainment. Indeed, when the original readers of David’s prophetic psalm read “bulls of Bashan” their minds would have turned to “Og, king of Bashan ...of the remnant of the giants” who was so big he had an iron bedstead that was “nine cubits in its length and four cubits in its width ...all Bashan was called the land of the giants” (Deuteronomy 3:11, 15). In the Bible, giants are symbolic of evil on a grand scale. They are “freakish” humans, monstrous enemies of God (Genesis 6:4-7, 1 Samuel chapter 17). The original readers of Psalm 22 also would have thought of the fact that Bashan was an area divided from the rest of Israel by the river Jordan, hence actually outside of the land of covenant promise (Deuteronomy 3:17). And of course the “bulls” metaphor would have brought to mind the forceful, dangerous character of that beast of the field (Exodus 21:28-32). Thus the point being made is that the enemies of Christ were beastly, grotesque, dangerous caricatures of “jewishness” and actually outside the covenant.

The major failing of dispensational interpretation is the refusal to understand biblical symbolism in light of the Scripture itself - unless it serves the dispensational purpose. The example from Psalm 22 is easy. The truth is, the passage from Zechariah 14 considered below is easy as well. It simply depends upon the presuppositions of the interpreter: should I let the Bible interpret this passage for me, or should I assume it concerns the 21st century before I even begin? The answer is clear. 89 “...as inspiration, it did not involve the suspension or suppression of the human

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predestination.⁹⁰

To change the analogy, we might say the prophets were like trial lawyers pressing a case against rebellious men. Now then, if you were on trial for your life, what sort of lawyer would you want to represent you? A plodding “nothing but the facts” sort of man, or a fiery, charismatic, forceful, convincing, “nothing but the facts without the boring factual language” man? Well, the latter, of course. So it is with God. Obviously God is never on trial for his life - instead he is the “Judge of all the earth.” However, those peoples and nations that rebel against him certainly are on trial. And God “hires” the best lawyers available to bring the case against those rebels. But here is the twist: God does so in order to turn the rebellious away from their sin. If they refuse to do so, they are left without excuse. The men used by God to bring charges against the wicked used the language of hyperbole and metaphor and did so in a fiery, charismatic, forceful and convincing manner. They gave the rebellious people of God their best last chance and if they refused to repent they left the apostates without excuse.

What Rebellion Is Really Like

In Exodus 20:3-4 we read that God commands his people to have no other gods before him - that we must not make any image to worship it. Not long after this command was given at Sinai, the children of Israel made a golden calf and “corrupted themselves” by worship-

faculties, so neither did it interfere with the free exercise of the distinctive mental characteristics of the individual. If a Hebrew was inspired, he spake Hebrew; if a Greek, he spake Greek; if an educated man, he spoke as a man of culture; if an uneducated man, he spoke as such a man was wont to speak. If his mind was logical, he reasoned, as Paul did; if emotional and contemplative, he wrote as John wrote. All this is involved in the fact that God uses his instruments according to their nature. The sacred writers impressed their peculiarities on their several productions as plainly as though they were the subjects of no extraordinary influence.” Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, 3 vols., (n.d.; Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1995), 1.157.

90 Gordon H. Clark, *God's Hammer: The Bible and its Critics*, (Jefferson MA: The Trinity Foundation, 1982, 1987), 43-44.

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ing it (Exodus 32:7-8). Indeed this propensity to “play the harlot” with (false) gods and make sacrifices to (false) gods, was a constant problem in Israel (Exodus 32:15).

Later, when God sent prophets to pronounce judgment for worshipping false gods, those prophets did not simply say, “stop playing the harlot and start being faithful to Jehovah.” Instead they put a little more “punch” into their delivery.

For instance, In Ezekiel 16 the prophet uses graphic, figurative language to describe God’s covenant relationship with Jerusalem. He then continues with metaphorical language to describe her subsequent apostasy. In verse 15 Ezekiel says, “you trusted in your own beauty, played the harlot because of your fame, and poured out your harlotry on everyone passing by who would have it.” He goes on to say they are “not like a harlot because you scorned payment. You are an adulterous wife who takes strangers instead of her husband” making payments to her lovers rather than the other way around (vss. 31-32).

Now, wouldn’t it have been more, shall we say, *Christian*, to simply have told the people of Jerusalem they were doing wrong? Was it really necessary for Ezekiel to be so “crude?” Obviously when God chose Ezekiel as a spokesman - a brush to bring a certain texture to his canvas - He was not concerned with offending delicate souls. For as we see in Ezekiel 23:7-8, 19-20, the prophet also said, “Thus she committed her harlotry with them, all of them choice men of Assyria; and with all for whom she lusted. With all her idols she defiled herself. She has never given up her harlotry brought from Egypt, for in her youth they had lain with her, pressed her virgin bosom, and poured out their immorality upon her ...she multiplied her harlotry in calling to remembrance the days of her youth, when she played the harlot in the land of Egypt. For she lusted after her paramours, whose flesh (genitals) is like the flesh of donkeys and whose issue (ejaculation of semen), is like the issue of horses” (parenthesis added). Try reading that passage in church the next time there is an opportunity to share what “God has placed on your heart this week.”

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I imagine you will raise a few eyebrows.

And Its Consequences

A prophet's job was not finished after he had reminded the people of their sin. He would then go on to tell them of the punishment that awaited them unless they repented. Moses told the children of Israel that if they turned away from God, they should expect God to bring a "nation against you from afar, from the end of the earth, as swift as the eagle flies, a nation whose language you will not understand, a nation of fierce countenance, which does not respect the elderly nor show favor to the young" (Deuteronomy 28:49-50). Moses was a prophet himself and tended toward colorful language from time to time. However it is later, when the judgment is actually being pronounced that the prophets really begin to crank it up.

Isaiah said concerning the invasion of Israel by the Assyrians⁹¹ that the invaders would roar like lions, their horse's hooves would be like flint and the chariot wheels a whirlwind (5:28-29).

Jeremiah prophesied of the destruction of Jerusalem by the Babylonians, saying, "the lion has come up from the thicket, and a destroyer of nations is on his way. He has gone forth from his place to make your land desolate. Your cities will be laid waste without inhabitant" (4:7). As you can see here, Jeremiah uses metaphor, literal language and hyperbole in the same breath. He says "the lion has come up from the thicket" and means the king of Babylon has come up to overthrow the nation of Judah. He also says that the Babylonians would make the land desolate - a literally true statement. Jeremiah adds that the cities would be "without inhabitant" which is an example of hyperbole. The literal fact is that the cities *were* left with inhabitants (Jeremiah 52:15-16). This in no way impinges the character of Jeremiah, nor of the Bible. It is simply an example of prophetic language.

When Ezekiel announces judgment on Jerusalem, he continues

91 Although I disagree, Alexander suggests that Isaiah may have been referring to the Babylonians or possibly even the Romans. See *Isaiah*, 1.141.

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the theme we read of earlier - the idea that Israel is a harlot. Through Ezekiel God said he would gather all the “lovers” of Jerusalem and he would “judge you as women who break wedlock or shed blood are judged; I will bring blood upon you in fury and jealousy” (16:38). He goes on to say the former lovers of Jerusalem will strip her of her clothes, stone her and thrust her through with swords (vss. 39-40). Later Ezekiel said God would delegate judgment to the former lovers of Jerusalem and they would “deal furiously with” her and would cut off her nose and ears (23:22-27). There is no doubt this forceful prophecy of Ezekiel would have been an attention getter. Once again we see a mixture of metaphor, hyperbole and literal language (all prophetic language deals with literal truth: it is simply expressed in different ways). The illicit lovers of Jerusalem are of course the nations (specifically Egypt and Babylon) that Judah and Jerusalem “lusted after” in idolatry. These “lovers” did in fact inflict punishment (judgment) upon Judah. By the time Ezekiel said these words, the “judgment” brought by Egypt was passed (2 Chronicles 35:20-36:4), while the full “judgment” brought by Babylon (and its subject people representing other “lovers”), was yet to come (2 Chronicles 36:17-21, Ezekiel 33:21).

The use of strong metaphor and hyperbole is the outstanding characteristic of prophetic language. Rather than simply say the Assyrians would be a menace to Judah, Isaiah says they would roar like lions. Instead of saying the king of Babylon would attack Judah, Jeremiah said a lion would come up out of the thicket. Not content to say the people of Jerusalem were wicked and going to be judged, Ezekiel said the city was a harlot, a filthy adulteress who engaged in lewd and shameful relations with many lovers - lovers who would turn and destroy the harlot. For the most part, the prophets shied away from simple, “literal” language and instead, as good trial lawyers, strove to stir the emotions of their audience with the graphic, colorful language of metaphor, simile and hyperbole.

The Living Dead

This use of non-literal language to clearly portray literal truth

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was not restricted to the “major” prophets. We see a splendid example of this approach in Zechariah 14:12 where we read, “And this shall be the plague with which the Lord will strike all the people who fought against Jerusalem: their flesh shall dissolve while they stand on their feet, their eyes shall dissolve in their sockets, and their tongues shall dissolve in their mouths.”

Now, there are those who interpret this passage as a reference to the effects of a nuclear blast.⁹² However, there are a number of problems with that interpretation. To begin with, if that is the aim of this verse we must ask ourselves what possible purpose it could it have served the original readers? A text should be understood first of all by reference to its original author and his immediate audience. Indeed, “Any alleged sense of Scripture which is unrelated to the original referent must be suspect ...in the case of the Bible, if the text had any authority for its original hearers, it must have been expressed in a way understandable to them, so that they could be responsible to act on the teaching.”⁹³

In addition, the claim that this passage concerns nuclear war is always based on the belief that it also has to do with vengeance on behalf of a modern day “restored Israel” that practices animal sacrifice and endures a tribulation prior to the second (third?) coming of Jesus. As we have seen from our study of Jesus as the fulfillment of

92 And then there are those who are not satisfied with the fantasies of decades past in their quest for originality. John Hagee (while not throwing out the nuclear blast theory altogether), believes that Zechariah may be describing the effects of a yet unknown virus. John Hagee, *Beginning Of The End*, (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1996), 88. Hagee, Lindsey et al make these outlandish statements while only pretending to base their views on careful study of the whole counsel of God. In this instance, Hagee does not turn to the Bible to interpret the passage, but to his own experience. He quotes Zechariah 14:12-15 (he’s very biblical after all!), and then spends the next five pages discussing things he has read or heard concerning the Ebola virus, nuclear blasts and chemical weapons. Not once does he support his speculation with additional Scripture. Everything he has to say about the passage originates in his own mind. This is how he handles every text. Why does the Christian book-buying public let these goof-balls get away with this?

93 MacCartney and Clayton, 29-30.

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all promise, the only “restored Israel” the Bible is concerned with is the rebuilt tabernacle of David that is in fact the new Israel - Jew and Gentile alike brought into the body of Christ, the Church. The Church is the only “restored Israel” the Bible knows anything about.

Third, finding a description of a nuclear blast in this passage betrays a lack of familiarity with the language of prophecy. As we have seen, the prophets routinely used non-literal language to convey their message. The prophets were the fiery, forceful, charismatic “nothing but the facts without the boring factual language” lawyers in the court of God. They were the bold, brash brushes, used by God to give a distinctive texture to his canvas. Unfortunately far too many Christians are bored by the drama of the court and are poor judges of art.

In light of what we have seen thus far, how would the original readers have understood this passage? We are not claiming that all the recipients of this prophecy would have understood it. Nevertheless, it is foolish to believe God brought forth his word in a certain culture with certain language forms only to mock that culture and linguistic norm by speaking of things that had absolutely no connection to that language and culture.

Moreover, to insist that nuclear holocaust is in view here is to believe God is interested in what *we* feel is important. The truth is, God has had nothing to say in his Scripture about some of the most tremendous events in the history of mankind - supposed Bible codes notwithstanding.⁹⁴

Sin Will Eat You Alive

Have you ever told someone that some sin they were indulging in would “eat them alive?” Perhaps you have warned a Christian brother or sister that if they harbor bitterness, that bitterness will, “tear them apart.” If so, you have given that fellow Christian a true biblical warning. For, as we see in Deuteronomy 28:20, 32 and 65, God

⁹⁴ John Weldon, *Decoding the Bible Code: Can We Trust the Message?*, (Eugene: Harvest House Publishers, 1998).

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warned Israel that part of the punishment for rebellion would be confusion, eyes that fail with longing, loss of strength, trembling hearts and anguish of soul. This is another example of metaphorical language - here used to describe the consequences of sin. In other words, Moses described the spiritual or emotional consequences of sin in physical terms. The Israelites wouldn't literally go blind in their longing to see their children (vs. 32), nor would they develop irregular heartbeats as a result of being taken into captivity (vs. 65). In the same way we understand we should not take it literally when someone says they are "eaten up with bitterness," the Israelites understood "failing eyes," and "trembling hearts" were metaphors for anguish of soul not physical maladies.

As we might expect, this rather "mundane" warning against sin is repeated elsewhere in the Bible in a more forceful fashion. For instance in Psalm 38 we read "O Lord do not rebuke me in Your wrath, nor chasten me in Your hot displeasure! For Your arrows pierce me deeply, and Your hand presses me down. There is no soundness in my flesh because of Your anger, nor any health in my bones because of my sin. For my iniquities have gone over my head; like a burden they are too heavy for me. My wounds are foul and festering because of my foolishness. I am troubled, I am bowed down greatly; I go mourning all the day long. For my loins are full of inflammation, and there is no soundness in my flesh. I am feeble and severely broken; I groan because of the turmoil of my heart" (vss. 1-8, cf. Psalms 6, 22, 31:9-13, 102, Proverbs 17:22, Lamentations 1:13).

In short, one of the effects of sin is an inner rot, a loss of heart and a wasting away of one's very life. Although David may have experienced certain physical symptoms in his anguish, even that was the result of the spiritual and emotional turmoil he felt over his sin. There is a death and corruption of the spirit that takes place as a result of sin, a "decay of spirits and affluence of ill humours."⁹⁵ Obviously God did not literally pierce David with arrows, nor did David have literal wounds that were festering because of his sin.

⁹⁵ Poole, 1.256.

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Clearly this is metaphor used to describe the effects of sin in the life of a Believer.

There is a difference, then, between the subject of David's psalm and of Zechariah's prophecy that helps to explain the finality of the latter over against the hope of the former: Zechariah's prophecy speaks of the unregenerate. He speaks not of festering wounds (wounds may normally be healed), nor of inflammation (that may clear up), but of death and rotting - irreversible rotting of the eyes, tongue and flesh. In so saying he speaks of a "rotting" of the soul. The unregenerate do not grieve over their sin and thus are never made to feel "feeble and severely broken." As Thomas Moore wrote concerning Zechariah 14:12: "(This verse) introduces the declaration of punishment that God would inflict on his enemies. This passage is parallel to Isaiah 66:24, and seems to allude to the same general facts. It is a figurative description of the punishment of sin. ...the punishment is corruption, which is set forth by the terrible image of a living death, a fearful, anomalous state, in which the mouldy rottenness of death is combined in horrible union with the vivid, conscious sensibility of life."⁹⁶

If we reference Moore's "parallel" passage in Isaiah 66:24 we see that it speaks of the eternal punishment of hell - "their worm does not die and their fire is not quenched" - words Jesus used to describe the horrors of hell (Mark 9:44, 46, 48). Clearly this is the culmination of the curse of sin as described in Zechariah.⁹⁷ Yet this punishment really begins in this life. Jesus said those who do not believe in him are "condemned already" (John 3:18). And as Paul tells us in Romans 1, part of the punishment for sin is to be given over to sin so it may work its corruption in the sinner to the utmost (1:24-32).⁹⁸ Indeed, Paul describes the unregenerate as already "dead in trespasses and sins" (Ephesians 2:1, 5). One might say that one characteristic of hell

96 Thomas V. Moore, *Haggai, Zechariah, And Malachi*, (1856; Edinburgh: The Banner Of Truth Trust, 1979), 310.

97 Leland Ryken, James C. Wilhoit, et al, eds, *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery*, (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1998), 376-377.

98 Murray, *Romans*, 1.43-45.

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is the anguish of soul that is experienced in this life multiplied to an unfathomable degree. Yes there is real physical torture, a burning and pain experienced in hell (Matthew 10:28, Luke 16:23-24, Jude 7 etc.). Yet, it is likewise true that just those sorts of things characterize the torment of soul that is felt (to a much lesser degree) by those who are under the lash of Satan in this life.

In the new testament, James uses the same sort of imagery as Zechariah when he warns the unfaithful rich among his readers, "Come now, you rich, weep and howl for your miseries that are coming upon you! Your riches are corrupted, and your garments are moth-eaten. Your gold and silver are corroded, and their corrosion will be a witness against you and will eat your flesh like fire. You have heaped up your treasures in the last days" (James 5:1-3).

It is striking how these words take us back to the pronouncement of the prophet Zechariah. Like the prophet, James metaphorically describes the effects of sin on the soul. Moreover, James wrote his words in the last days of the old covenant age. He is warning the unbelieving rich they will suffer greatly in the days ahead for their sinful reliance on wealth. He tells them, when the Lord Jesus returns in judgment on apostate Israel (in the first century) they would be found stripped of support. The result would be great suffering during that time of vengeance rather than the peace that passes understanding (Luke 21:22).

In summary, the famous "rotting flesh" prophecy is about the consequences of sin: consequences that the unrepentant begin to experience in this life and are fully realized in hell. It has to do with the degradation of the soul experienced by those who live in rebellion toward God. And, according to Zechariah, to reject and persecute the Church (to fight against Jerusalem), is to be in rebellion against God and to subject oneself to the effects of (unrepentant) sin. Indeed, Zechariah does not have in mind a "restored Israel" in chapter 14 at all. Instead, his favorable concern is with those who are in Christ. Judgment is pronounced against (old) Israel which persecuted Christ and his body (Galatians 4:29).

Conclusion

In truth the graphic language of Zechariah concerning the consequence of sin is no more startling than the language that Ezekiel used to describe the same sin of rebellion and apostasy. Yet when confronted by the metaphorical language of Zechariah, many Christians feel the need to impose their own prejudice on the text. Yes a nuclear holocaust is a horrible possibility - for us. But that does not give us leave to throw out the interpretation provided for this passage by the Scripture itself. And yes, the highly sexualized age in which we live makes Ezekiel's figurative language - although graphic - less shocking than it might otherwise be. But that does not give us leave to downplay the severity of rebellion and apostasy. Nevertheless, many Christians do just that. A self-centered reading of Zechariah 14:12 makes us think of a catastrophe as we would define it. A "modern" reading of Ezekiel's "harlot prophecies" makes us forget how important faithfulness is to God. It is so important, he was willing to dispossess Israel, to pass judgment on them and to give the kingdom to another nation producing the fruit thereof.