

26 Shevat, 5767 (Feb. 14, 2007) *B'nai Chayim Yeshiva: Notes on Prophecy* J. M. Terrett

When I was asked to teach on prophecy in the Yeshiva, I was not afraid dealing with a controversial topic, but I still wanted to exercise considerable caution. It has been my experience that some of the most amazing and disturbing departures from sound biblical teaching; occur in the realm of biblical prophecy. It is, in my humble opinion, the weakest link in evangelical theology and last night, in the Yeshiva, I styled the contemporary evangelical approach to prophecy as a form of **Evangelical Gematria**, or **Evangelical Cabbalism**.

I would say that there are basically three main misunderstandings upon which evangelical Christianity bases its flights of fancy in the realm of supposedly "biblical" prophecy. First of all, though up to 70% of the Scriptures are made up of prophecies, **very little of the material is given over to predictions about the future**. Prophecy is mainly reminders to various people to continue to walk with G-d and warnings about what will happen if they do not.

Prophecy wants to give us an otherworldly supernatural understanding of life, so that we can walk daily in anticipation of the Eternity which awaits all of us. It wants to remind us who G-d is and what He is like and what He is capable of. It also wants to remind us who we are and what we are capable of, in both a positive and a negative sense.

Secondly, in order to understand biblical prophecy, you must be able to clearly **distinguish between a literal and a literary meaning**. Yeshua is the literal Son of G-d, and He is our literal Saviour. As part of this **literal** ministry, He offered Himself on the cross for each of us as the **literary** Lamb of G-d. In other words, He does not have real hooves, nor is He covered in wool.

When the disciples met the resurrected L-rd on the road to Emmaus do you know why they did not recognize Him? According to a **literal** understanding of Revelation 5:6, He now has **seven** horns and **seven** eyes, which are the **seven** spirits of G-d sent throughout the entire earth. When Simon Peter first laid eyes on him, he grabbed his cell phone and dialled the X-Files number to report an alien sighting.

Are their seven spirits of G-d? Does our L-rd now have seven eyes and seven horns? In a **literary** sense, yes He does, but in the **literal** sense, He certainly does not. In the Bible a **literal event**, such as the Flood, refers to an actual time/space event and a **literary image**, such as the three "sevens" of Rev. 5:6 are symbolic pictures which describe certain specific aspects of reality.

Now to the third, and the most potentially controversial, point of my understanding of prophecy. If you do not distinguish between a literary and a literal meaning in the Bible, you will become as confused and as bizarre as those Cabbalists who feel that because Hebrew uses letters for numbers, that every word of the Torah has any number of special, hidden meanings – once you understand one of the many formulas which show you how to turn each word into a number, or series of numbers.

These can then be added, and subtracted in marvellous ways to come up with all kinds of new meanings and special messages in what I would consider to be a form of **theological astrology** – instead of assigning special, arbitrary meanings to the positions and movements of the stars, Cabbalists assign special and arbitrary meanings to the words of the Torah. Some would go as far as to say that the literal meaning of the Torah is not the intended meaning and must be ignored or bypassed if you want to get at the real "hidden" meaning of the text.

This shuffling of numbers brings me to a point about the use of numbers in the Scriptures. **Most round numbers in the Scriptures are meant in a literary, symbolic sense and not in a literal sense**. If you add the numbers which are used to describe how long the flood lasted and if you compare them with the start date (Gen. 7:1) and the end date (Gen. 8:13, 14) of the Flood, there is a considerable discrepancy between them.

In the Hebrew of the Scriptures, 40 days was used to describe a painfully long time, and 150 days symbolized an extremely painful long time. In English we have expressions which use numbers symbolically, like: "a month of Sundays" or "once in a blue moon" (when there are two full moons in the same month). Also, we say: "thanks a million" and "a third time pays all". In the Bible, three is often used to establish certainty (holy, holy, holy), as is five (Isaiah 9:5), while seven is the number of G-d (Rev. 5:6) and 28 is four sevens (Eccl. 3:2-8 and 12:3-9). In Judaism, the number 70 is considered to be the number of the nations (Num. 29:13-34, where 70 bulls are sacrificed) and in the Scriptures, the number one thousand is often used to represent G-d's unending love towards those who keep His word (Ex. 20:6, etc.).

The use of numbers in the Scriptures is not always symbolic, such as when the censuses of the tribes were taken and when lengths of the reigns of various kings are given. **However, numbers in the Scriptures should not be assigned both symbolic (literary) and literal meanings.** The meaning of a symbol, such as calling the L-rd the Lion of Judah, is never the same as the literal meaning of the symbol, but only shares certain, specific characteristics which the symbol is used to convey.

Now for the clincher – ***either all the numbers in the Book of Revelation are symbolic, or all of them are literal, because there is no distinction made for the numbers to be used in more than one sense.*** Either the L-rd has seven literal horns, and seven literal eyes, or the use of seven in the Revelation is symbolic **whenever** it occurs. One of the possible exceptions to the symbolic use of numbers in the Revelation is when it says that there are four living beings and twenty four elders – and yet John only gives approximate descriptions of the both the beings and the elders, so their actual, detailed appearance remains a mystery. As well, the use of four is being used to describe four aspects of the Messiah (Lion = King; calf = servant; man = humanity; eagle = divinity) and later in the book, there are twelve tribes and twelve apostles whose names are on the gates and the walls of the New Jerusalem.

So, I am contending that it would be incorrect to assign a literal meaning to any of the literary numbers in the Revelation, especially as concerns the various ***round number temporal references*** of the various visions. In the same way, it would also be wrong to assign a literal meaning to one day equalling a literal thousand years in 2 Peter 9:8. Before I deal with the prophecies concerning the Return of Israel from Babylon, let me preface this next section with a discussion of something which is sadly lacking in most supposedly "prophetic" circles: **prophetic accountability.**

In Deut. 18:21, 22 it says when a prophetic says that something is going to happen and it doesn't, he is not to be listened to. Deut. 13:1-5 goes a step further and says false prophets are to be stoned. Paul says that all prophecies are to be judged (I Cor. 14:29) and that believers are to examine all things and only hold onto that which is good (I Thess. 5:21). Luke commends the Jews of Berea for examining the Scriptures daily to evaluate what was taught to them (Acts 17:11). In I Cor. 4:6, Paul exhorts the Corinthians not to go beyond that which is written and he encourages Timothy to study the Scriptures so he can rightly dispense them (II Tim. 2:15).

In Jeremiah 23:28-32, the L-RD speaks against prophets who want to pass off their own words as His and in Ezek. 13:3, He pronounces woe upon the foolish prophets who follow their own spirit and see nothing. In Deut. 29:29, Moses says that the secret things belong to the L-RD and those which are revealed belong to us and to our children forever, that we may put them into practice.

In Acts 1:3-11, the L-rd outlines a sane approach to future things when He says that it is not given to us to know the timing of the L-rd's return – it is given to us to be filled with His Spirit and, thus empowered, to take the Gospel to the ends of the earth. The angels extend this understanding by saying that the L-rd will return in the same manner as he left and not secretly or partially, like some **cosmic yo-yo** or **celestial hovering helicopter**. In Hebrews 7:24, 25 we are told what He is doing in Heaven – interceding on our behalf - and in 2 Peter 3:3-10, we are told what will happen on the Day of the L-rd, the moment He leaves Heaven – immediate, total cosmic meltdown.

The use of symbolic numbers to calculate dates and times is as foolish and nonsensical as the use of Cabbalism to derive true or hidden meanings from words in the Bible. The meaning of symbolic numbers should not be derived from their **arithmetic value**. As well, the meaning of other symbols in the Bible should not be derived from their literal value. The L-rd is neither a literal lion nor a literal lamb and He does not have seven literal horns or seven literal eyes.

This perspective gives a whole new perspective on the meaning of all the other symbolic numbers in the Revelation, which, by the same token also **cannot have a literal meaning**. Let me move on from this radical departure from a traditional evangelical prophetic understanding and exercise my need for prophetic accountability (and integrity) by dealing with those prophecies in the Tenach (Old Testament) which refer the return of Israel from the Babylonian captivity and the rebuilding of Solomon's temple.

In order to do this, I want to establish a broad view of what I see the Scriptures teaching concerning the prophetic purposes of G-d and they are **fivefold**. All prophecy is based on two fundamental passages in **Genesis: 3:15** (the seed of woman) and **12:2, 3** (a great nation and a blessing to all nations). The first stage of G-d's prophetic intentions with mankind, is **deliverance**, and concerns Israel becoming a great nation, birthed in Canaan, nurtured in Egypt and delivered from slavery in the Exodus.

The second stage, the **Promised Land**, deals with the establishment of His people in the land, which according to Genesis chapter two, shares the approximate boundaries of the original Garden of Eden. When His people ceased to shine as a spiritual homing beacon to the scattered nations, He implemented the third stage in His prophetic intentions for Israel and for mankind, **Babylon**, which was both a **temporary** captivity and an **eventual** return. The Scriptures teach us that the return was intended to be permanent (Amos 9:13-15), but that, along with all of His promises, such an assurance was conditional.

In **Gen. 18:18, 19** we are told that it was Abraham's prophetic, generational legacy to teach his descendents to walk in the way of the L-rd (**Derech Adonai**) in order that He could fulfill for them all that which He promised to Abraham. It is an "if and only if" scenario where their adherence/obedience to the way of the L-rd (compare this to John 14:6) was a **prerequisite** to their **reception** of the promises. The prophet John, called the Baptist, told the Jewish people of His time that their physical descent from Abraham did not given them a special status before G-d, because G-d could raise up descendents to Abraham from the rocks of the ground (Matt. 3:9).

It is not the call which produces the promises, but the obedience and righteousness which is the integral "if" which always proceeds the integral "then". His intention for His people was that they should dwell in security and righteousness while they awaited the fourth stage of G-d's prophetic purposes, the **Messiah**. **His people, the great nation from Abraham, were then to take the message of the Messiah to the ends of the earth, and thus be a blessing to all nations** (Matt. 28:18-20). The fifth stage in His purposes is **Eternity**, when all shall be judged, rewarded and punished (see especially: Rom. 2:16; I Cor. 4:5; Eccl. 12:13, 14 and Matt. 25:31-46).

However, in between the advent of the promised Messiah and the eternal state, an incredibly **tragic catastrophe** befell the Jewish people. They rebelled against the covenant allegiance they had contracted with the Roman government and were slaughtered in their millions. The second temple was destroyed and when they rebelled again under a false Messiah (**Bar Kokhba**), Jerusalem was firmly trodden underfoot by the Gentiles who went as far as to deny Jewish people access to this sacred city. It is both telling and sad that the only portion of the holy temple which survived intact was the outside retaining wall of the court of the Gentiles.

So the chosen people, the apple of G-d's eye, weep for their loss and pray for their deliverance at the outer wall of the court of the Gentiles. Now here is the catch – all the prophecies of the Tenach which deal with the return of Israel from Babylon and with the rebuilding of the temple have been fulfilled and **cannot** be re-applied to the condition of the Jewish people after 70 C.E.

There is no **double fulfilment of scriptural prophecy** and especially not of that which has already been fulfilled. Having said this, from where then do we derive our understanding of the fate of the Jewish people, and indeed of all the nations of mankind? We must derive them from the New Testament and from those Tenach passages which deal with the various aspects of Messiah and His generational ministry before His Return. We can no more re-apply the prophecies concerning the captivity and the Return from Babylon to the current or future state of the Jewish people, than we can re-apply the prophecies about the exodus from Egypt and the conquest of the Holy Land, as if these events would be doubled or repeated in the purposes of G-d.

Having said this, I want to go to the **premium prophetic passage** in the New Testament (Matt. 24) and derive from it four of what I believe are the **seven scriptural signs** of the L-rd's Return, (called the Eschaton by theologians). I will draw from some of the other New Testament prophetic portions with one proviso which concerns the Book of Revelation. It is without a doubt the **most prophetic** piece of writing in the entire Scriptures, containing well over 200 quotes from the Tenach. It is given in a series of paired visions and could be described as the **celestial clockwork** of G-d's prophetic purposes, while Israel will always be His actual **time piece**.

So with all of its **magestic imagery** and **symbolic finery**, we can see the **cosmic** side of all the conflicts believers will face during their earthly pilgrimage, but, again, **we can not use any of the symbolic numbers to determine a timeframe for the return of the L-rd**. As a matter of fact, we cannot establish any kind of time frame apart from the fulfillment of the five stages of redemptive purposes of G-d. The Scriptures teach that the End Times began after the resurrection and ascension of our L-rd and they are called the End Times because all that needs to happen for the end of the world to occur is for the L-rd to return and inaugurate the New Heaven and Earth, once the first ones have been demolished and the judgment of the nations has occurred.

So, I said there are seven signs of the return of the L-rd, four of which I derive from the 24th chapter of Matthew (and the rest from other portions of the New Testament), and here they are.

Before the L-rd returns we will see:

1. **Worldwide Hatred of the Jewish people by all nations (24:9)**
2. **Worldwide Iniquity (24:12), part of which will be**
3. **Worldwide Apostasy, as in the Days of Noah (24:37 and 2 Thess. 2:3)**
4. **Worldwide sharing of the Gospel (24:14)**
5. **A worldwide antichrist (2 Thess. 2:5-12, called the Beast in Revelation)**
6. **Jerusalem must no longer be trodden underfoot of the nations (Luke 21:24)**
7. **All Israel must be re-grafted into the holy Olive Tree (Rom. 11:25, 26)**

Each of these signs could be further developed, but I want to conclude with an explanation of the last one. When Paul says that all Israel will be saved, he does not mean that every single last Jewish person who ever lived. He means that the nation or final generation of Israel will turn or return to the Messiah from Nazareth and that this generation of Israel will be characterized by an **international community acceptance** of Yeshua as the Messiah of promise. The Gospel has always been to the Jew first and also to the Gentile. At the end of the Messianic age in which we live, when the time of the nations is fulfilled, then the last nation to come into the Gospel will be the one to whom it was first preached – and who formed the majority of its adherents for nearly the first two centuries of its existence. Amen.