

# Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

## The Basis of the Premillennial Faith in Hermeneutics

CHARLES C. RYRIE, TH.D., PH.D.

1

Hermeneutics is the science which teaches the principles of interpretation. Biblical hermeneutics in particular is the science which determines the principles of the interpretation of the Holy Scriptures. Hermeneutics is not exegesis, for exegesis is the practice of an art of which hermeneutics is the governing science. Hermeneutics, therefore, is the more basic science.

If it is to be shown that premillennialism is a Biblical doctrine, there must first be laid a foundation in a right understanding of hermeneutics, so that a proper exegesis may be built thereupon; hence, this discussion of hermeneutics as a basis of the premillennial faith is essential to the subsequent argument.

### I. Importance of Hermeneutics

Harnack admits that in recent times a “mild type of ‘academic’ chiliasm has been developed from a belief in the verbal inspiration of the Bible.”<sup>1</sup> While it is recognized that inspiration is not equivalent to hermeneutics, yet it is insisted that the former is a prerequisite to the latter. Although it could not be said that all amillennialists deny the verbal, plenary inspiration of the Scriptures, yet, as it will be shown later, it seems to be the first step in that direction. The system of spiritualizing Scripture is a tacit denial of the doctrine of the verbal, plenary inspiration of the Scriptures which this author holds. Nevertheless, it is significant that Harnack, no friend of premillennialism, links so closely verbal inspiration with premillennialism. Assuming the verbal, plenary inspiration of Scripture, notice how crucial is the character of the issue concerning the science of hermeneutics in relation to premillennialism. The issue concerns the literal versus the figurative interpretation of Scripture. Hospers quotes Pieters, who is an amillennialist, in the foreword to his book on hermeneutics to show that principles of interpretation are determinative in the controversy. Pieters says:

The question whether the Old Testament prophecies concerning the people of God must be interpreted in their ordinary sense, as other Scriptures are interpreted, or

---

<sup>1</sup> Harnack, *op. cit.*, XV, 497.

# Lion and Lamb Apologetics

can properly be applied to the Christian Church, is called the question of the spiritualization of prophecy. This is one of the major problems in biblical interpretation, and confronts everyone who makes a serious study of the Word of God. It is one of the chief keys to the difference of opinion between Premillenarians and the mass of Christian scholars. The former reject such spiritualization, the latter employ it; and as long as there is no agreement on this point the debate is interminable and fruitless.<sup>2</sup>

Hamilton, another amillennialist, confesses:

Now we must frankly admit that a literal interpretation of the Old Testament prophecies gives us just such a picture of an earthly reign of the Messiah as the premillennialist pictures.<sup>3</sup>

It is little wonder then that Rutgers, too, another amillennialist, regards the premillennialist's interpretation of Scripture as the fundamental error of the system. Thus, it is clear that the question of interpretation is a basic and crucial one which demands careful consideration. It can either make or break the premillennial system.

## II. General Principles of Interpretation

There are certain definite and recognized principles of Biblical interpretation which will be stated first. Then it can be shown how closely the premillennial interpretation adheres to these general principles. This is the proper and logical order, though amillennialism reverses it, stating its system first and then formulating principles of interpretation which will work for that system. All doctrine must be built on sound principles of interpretation; otherwise, the doctrine must be changed. These are the general principles of hermeneutics.

*Interpret grammatically.* There is no more basic rule of interpretation than this. The interpreter must begin his work by studying the grammatical sense of the text, determining the exact meaning of the words according to linguistic usage and connection. A word is the vehicle of a thought; therefore, the meaning of any passage must be determined by a study of the words therein with the relationship sustained in the sentence. This is a natural corollary to the belief in the verbal, plenary inspiration of Scripture, for if one holds that the words of the text were inspired of God, then one must interpret those very words. A true exegesis is demanded.

---

<sup>2</sup> *The Principle of Spiritualization in Hermeneutics*, p. 5.

<sup>3</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 38.

# Lion and Lamb Apologetics

*Interpret according to the context.* The Bible is not a book of words or verses put together without any relation to one another. Therefore, the context, which includes both the immediate context and the wider scope of the section or book, must be studied in order to see the relation that each verse sustains to that which precedes and to that which follows. Nothing is better than to have an author explain himself, and the study of the context is one of the most trustworthy resources at the command of the interpreter. Sometimes the immediate context does not give all the needed light on a certain passage, and so the wider context, even the scope of the book itself, must be considered. The purpose of the writing, the people addressed, and the general theme of the book are all important factors. The later discussion of the new covenant in Hebrews 8 will afford a good example of this rule.

*Compare Scripture with Scripture.* This principle of interpretation, which was not employed until the Reformation, places hermeneutics on a true and solid foundation. It not only uses parallel passages in Scripture but also regulates the interpretation of each passage in conformity with the whole tenor of revealed truth. It brings low those who claim to receive the Bible as the Word of God, and who reject specific revelations in it because they do not fit into the framework of their preconceived theology. It is a great inconsistency to admit a positive revelation and then to reject things positively revealed. The application of this principle of hermeneutics means the harmonization of all the Bible. An obscure or seemingly contradictory passage cannot invalidate a doctrine clearly supported by this principle of the analogy of faith. Amillennialists who ridicule obscure points in the premillennial system should not forget that they have yet to produce, even in outline form, a system concerning which there is unanimous agreement among their own group.

These, then, are the general principles of interpretation. What use does premillennialism make of these general principles? Does it practice what it preaches? That premillennialism interprets grammatically, that is, literally, is undisputed, for this is the major point of difference, readily admitted, between premillennialism and amillennialism. It does appeal to the context, as in the example cited; and there is no question but that premillennialism claims to have a complete system which follows the rule of comparing Scripture with Scripture.

It is evident from amillennial commentaries and theologies that they accept a literal interpretation of most of the Bible, but in the field of eschatology they resort to the principle of spiritualization. Thus the system is in the position of using two different and contradictory principles of interpretation. It is useless, then, for amillennialists to argue against and object to premillennialism when the basic rules of interpretation are not

# Lion and Lamb Apologetics

established. Nevertheless, since the two systems do agree on general principles, the crux of the matter must lie in the field of principles of the interpretation of prophecy.

## III. Principles of Interpretation of Prophecy

All acknowledge the necessity for a valid rule for the interpretation of prophecy. Hamilton says typically:

There are many passages in prophecy which were meant to be taken literally. In fact a good working rule to follow is that the literal interpretation of prophecy is to be accepted unless (a) the passages contain obviously figurative language, or (b) unless the New Testament gives authority for interpreting them in other than a literal sense, or (c) unless a literal interpretation would produce a contradiction.<sup>4</sup>

Spiritualizing, then, is the answer of the amillennialist to the problem of the interpretation of prophecy. It is the same as allegorizing, and this method of interpretation does not have a savory origin. Farrar, who is no premillennialist, points out:

Allegory by no means sprang from spontaneous piety, but was the child of Rationalism which owed its birth to the heathen theories of Plato. It deserved its name, for it made Scripture say something else than it really meant....

Origen borrows from heathen Platonists and from Jewish philosophers a method which converts the whole of Scripture, alike the New and the Old Testament, into a series of clumsy, varying, and incredible enigmas. Allegory helped him to get rid of Chiliasm and superstitious literalism and the “antitheses” of the Gnostics, but it opened the door for deadlier evils.<sup>5</sup>

This raises a grave question at the very outset as to the integrity of this spiritualizing method of interpreting prophecy. Hamilton’s reasons for spiritualizing Scripture are easily answered. The figures for which the figurative language stands have a literal fulfillment. Many of the New Testament passages adduced as examples of spiritual interpretation of the Old Testament are merely citations of proof texts by Scripture writers in support of specific points. Finally, there is no justification for departing from the literal sense of Scripture because that sense creates an apparent contradiction. Many of these apparent contradictions will be discussed in the pages to follow, but it suffices to point

---

<sup>4</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 53.

<sup>5</sup> *History of Interpretation*, pp. 193–194, 196.

# Lion and Lamb Apologetics

out here that if contradictions justify rejection of the system, then amillennialism as a system must be rejected, for it has serious contradictions which still await solution.

But, it may well be asked, how does the premillennialist meet the problem of the interpretation of prophecy? Are there any special principles for the interpretation of prophecy which he employs but which are in accord with the basic hermeneutical principle of literal interpretation? These questions are answered by the following list of special principles for the interpretation of prophecy, which principles are consistent with, not contradictory to, the general principles of hermeneutics already discussed. These are not principles deduced from premillennial exegesis, but rather these are special rules growing out of the general rules of hermeneutics and the particular problem of prophecy upon which premillennial exegesis is based. If, then, these special principles which concern interpretation of prophecy are consistent with the basic law of hermeneutics, that is, literal interpretation, and if they point the way to a comprehensive, consistent, and harmonious system of Biblical interpretation, then premillennialism rests on an exceedingly firm basis in relation to hermeneutics.

*Consistency in principle.* This is a summary statement of that which has just been said. Prophecy is not a special case in that it demands special hermeneutics if such a system contradicts the basic principle of literal interpretation. There may be special outworkings of that principle but the principle must be consistent.

*Compare prophecy with prophecy.* This very fundamental principle of prophetic interpretation is enjoined by the Scripture itself, for Peter says, "Knowing this first, that no prophecy of the scripture is of any private interpretation" (2 Pet. 1:20). Ἰδίας is generally used in the sense of "one's own" (John 1:11; 1 Cor. 12:11; Matt. 14:13), and it simply means that no prophecy is to be interpreted by itself, but in the light of all that God has spoken on the subject. Every prophecy is part of a wonderful scheme of revelation, and this entire scheme as well as the interrelationship between the parts must be kept in mind. No one prophet received the revelation of all the truth; rather, the Book unfolds little by little, without contradiction, until we have a complete and perfect picture. In this connection it must be remembered that difficulties are not contradictions. Neither does the existence of a problem militate against the plain statements of prophecy. In dealing with such problems, Feinberg offers two pertinent suggestions:

First of all, when certain difficulties are affirmed of a doctrine which claims to be Biblical, one is only required to show that a solution of the alleged problem is possible. When certain passages are referred to which are said to contradict the premillennial doctrine, all that is necessary is to demonstrate that according to the rules of exegesis, a harmonization is possible. Secondly, sometimes even this cannot be fairly required. If any doctrine is shown on the basis of the laws of

# Lion and Lamb Apologetics

exegesis to be taught in the Bible, then to prove the doctrine false more is needed than the mere statement that the teaching brings to light even unanswerable problems. Otherwise, it could be demonstrated that the doctrines of salvation and redemption are false. The same method is used in rejecting and denying these doctrines that is employed in opposing premillennialism. In order to disprove premillennial interpretation of Scripture, its opponents must show that its exegesis of the passages of Scripture involved is false and erroneous.<sup>6</sup>

*Interpretation differs from application.* Interpretation is one; application is manifold. The primary aim of the interpreter is, in every case, to discover the true and only interpretation. Literal interpretation allows wide latitude in making spiritual applications from all passages, but there are two extremes to be avoided in applying this principle. Some have made so much of application that the true interpretation has been lost. This is usually a pathway to amillennialism. Others, and premillennialists are often guilty of this, have been so intent on discovering the interpretation that they have lost all application along with the resultant blessing. Psalm 122:6 may well be used as an example of the proper distinction between interpretation and application. The verse reads: “Pray for the peace of Jerusalem: they shall prosper that love thee.” The literal interpreter understands this verse in a twofold sense: (1) the primary reference is to the city Jerusalem and that for which it, as the capital, stands representative, that is, the nation Israel and the land, and (2) there is also a secondary application, but not interpretation, allowed, that is, an expression of the general truth that in all generations divine blessing has rested upon all who forwarded the work of those identified with the Lord. The application, however, does not in any way take the place of the interpretation.

*Figurative language.* Although much of prophecy is given in plain terms, much of it is in figurative language, and this constitutes a problem of interpretation. It may be said as a general statement that the use of figurative language does not compromise or nullify the literal sense of the thing to which it is applied. Figures of speech are a legitimate grammatical usage for conveying a literal meaning. More specifically, in interpreting figures of speech, it may be said, as Patrick Fairbairn does, that:

... care should be taken to give a fair and natural, as opposed to a far-fetched or fanciful, turn to the figure employed. We do so, on the ground, that figurative language is essentially of a popular caste, and is founded on those broader and more obvious resemblances, which do not need to be searched for, but are easily recognized and generally used.<sup>7</sup>

---

<sup>6</sup> *Premillennialism or Amillennialism?*, pp. 35–36.

<sup>7</sup> *HERMENEUTICAL MANUAL*, p. 148.



# Lion and Lamb Apologetics

Premillennialists' use of types often brings criticism in this connection. The use of types is perfectly legitimate as illustration of the truth though they should not be used to teach doctrine. All literalists recognize numerous types in prophecy, but they insist on solid, grammatical interpretation. It is one thing to say that Israel *typifies* the Church, as premillennialists rightly do; it is quite another thing to say that Israel *is* the Church, as amillennialists wrongly teach.

7

Figures of speech, then, give no cause for spiritualizing Scripture. Hospers says:

It must be noted that opponents of Premillenarianism often confuse matters by an equivocation of the legitimate figures of speech with their own artificial conception of spiritualization.<sup>8</sup>

Citing Galatians 4:24–26 as a specific example, he further says:

It is Paul's allegory. As already stated above, according to good rhetoric, an allegory is an extended metaphor. We must therefore sharply discriminate between taking allegory as equivalent to spiritualization and as regular figurative speech. In the passage Paul uses geographical terms by means of which he illustrated. Lightfoot puts it well: "With St. Paul, on the other hand, Hagar's career is an allegory because it is history. The symbol and the thing symbolized are the same in kind.... With Philo the allegory is the whole substance of his teaching; with St. Paul it is but an accessory. He uses it rather as an illustration than an argument."<sup>9</sup>

In conclusion it may be stated that in connection with the use of figurative language, the interpreter should look not for the literal sense of the words employed in the figure, but for the literal sense intended by the use of the figure. Figurative language does not make void literal interpretation.

*Law of fulfillment.* In the interpretation of unfulfilled prophecy, fulfilled prophecy forms the pattern. The logical way to discover how God will fulfill prophecy in the future is to discover how He fulfilled it in the past. If the hundreds of prophecies concerning Christ's first coming were fulfilled literally, how can anyone reject the literal fulfillment of the numerous prophecies concerning His Second Coming and reign on the earth? Feinberg cites a pertinent example:

---

<sup>8</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 10.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 21–22.

# Lion and Lamb Apologetics

Take, for example, the words of Gabriel in the first chapter of Luke where he foretells of the birth of Christ. According to the angel's words Mary literally conceived in her womb; literally brought forth a son; His name was literally called Jesus; He was literally great; and He was literally called the Son of the Highest. Will it not be as literally fulfilled that God will yet give to Christ the throne of His father David, that He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and that of His glorious kingdom there shall be no end?<sup>10</sup>

How inconsistent it is, then, to apply any kind of special hermeneutics to the prophecies of the Second Coming when there was no need of doing so with the prophecies of His first coming.

*Law of double reference.* Often a prophecy may have a double fulfillment, one being in the immediate circumstances and another in the distant future. Christ's being called great and the Son of the Highest, in the example cited above, has a double fulfillment. These things were literally true at His first coming, but they were not universally true as they will be at His Second Coming. The Psalms furnish many examples of this law, and amillennialists admit that there are many references which do not have an adequate explanation in the immediate experiences of David and which therefore point to a future fulfillment by David's greater Son. Nevertheless, double fulfillment is literal fulfillment and is therefore consistent with the basic rules of interpretation.

*Law of time relationship.* This law may assume several forms. Two or more events of a like character may be described in a common profile. The prophecy of Rachel's mourning for her children is an example of this. Scripture reveals that this applies to the Babylonian captivity in the first instance and to the slaughter of the innocent children under Herod in the second instance (Jer. 31:15; Matt. 2:18).

This law takes another form when future events are so mingled together on the horizon of prophecy as to appear like mountains in a range of mountains, the valleys being hidden. Simply because two events are placed side by side is no proof that the fulfillment will take place simultaneously or even in immediate succession. Isaiah 9:6–8; 61:1–2; Daniel 9:24–27 are a few examples of these tremendous gaps of time in the Scriptures.

## IV. Results and Conclusion

*Results of allegorical interpretation.* Those who employ the allegorical method of interpretation arrive at a diversity of interpretation. It is noteworthy that premillennialists and amillennialists agree on the main lines of truth whenever the

---

<sup>10</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 39.



# Lion and Lamb Apologetics

principle of literal interpretation is retained. The doctrines of theology proper, sin, salvation, etc., are generally agreed on, but in the doctrine of future things where the amillennialist feels obliged to employ his allegorical interpretation there is diversity. Not only is there diversity between the systems of interpretation, but there is also diversity within amillennial ranks. Such disagreement necessarily tends to discredit the authority of the Scriptures in the eyes of the unsaved and of the untaught.

Allegorical interpretation fosters modernism. As has often been pointed out, it is almost impossible to find a premillennial liberal or modernist. Among the Brethren, who are supposed to be the founders of modern literalism, liberalism is practically unknown. On the other hand, the great body of modernistic Protestantism is avowedly amillennial. Thus the allegorical method of amillennialism is a step toward modernism.

Finally, it should be pointed out that allegorical interpretation cannot explain the Scriptures. Of course, many doctrines are explained by amillennialists, but in these the literal principle is followed. But in the field of eschatology even the amillennialist admits that “the doctrine of future things is still an unexplored field.”<sup>11</sup> This certainly cannot be said of premillennialism.

*Results of literal interpretation.* When the principles of literal interpretation both in regard to general and special hermeneutics are followed, the result is the premillennial system of doctrine. In contrast to the results noted above, there is general agreement among premillennialists on the main lines of prophetic truth; premillennialism is diametrically opposed to modernism; and premillennialism does not leave large portions of the Scripture unexplained. All explanations may not agree in every detail, but at least all portions of Scripture are treated.

*Conclusion.* In this chapter we have dealt with the basic issue. If one interprets literally, he arrives at the premillennial system. If one employs the spiritualizing or allegorizing method of interpretation in the field of eschatology, he arrives at amillennialism. There is no disagreement over the fundamental rules of interpretation—even though they spell literal interpretation; the disagreement is in the interpretation of prophecy. The amillennialist’s answer is special hermeneutics which are special in the sense that they contradict all regular hermeneutical principles. The premillennialist’s answer includes some special considerations in interpreting prophecy, but these are special in the sense that they are particularly useful only in prophetic interpretation while at the same time being harmonious with the basic principles of hermeneutics. Thus, premillennialism is

---

<sup>11</sup> W. Masselink, *Why Thousand Years?*, p. 11

# Lion and Lamb Apologetics

solidly based in hermeneutics, and upon this solid foundation the remainder of this book is built.<sup>12</sup>

---

<sup>12</sup> Ryrie, C. C. (2005). *The basis of the premillennial faith* (pp. 31–41). Dubuque, IA: ECS Ministries.