



Conducted by
Alf Marsden

“We read in Heb. 1:1-2. “God, who at sundry times and in divers manners spake in time past unto the fathers by the prophets, hath in these last days spoken unto us by His Son”. Could you please explain what is meant by the phrase ‘in divers manners?’”

Reading from the New International Version the phrase ‘in divers manners’ is rendered ‘in various ways’, and this, I think, gives a clearer meaning. Relative to the complete statement from Heb. 1., there are one or two facts inherent in that statement which we must accept.

In the first place, if God used prophets as the medium for His revelation, then what emanated from the lips of the prophets must have been designated as *prophecy*; that is a truism that hardly needs stating. Secondly, if God spoke *through* the prophets, then the prophecies must inevitably have been what God wanted said, therefore, the prophet through whom God spoke could not err even though he, the

prophet, may not have realised the import of that which he prophesied (See 2 Peter 1:20-21. Also 1 Peter 1:10-12). Thirdly, if the above is true, then many of the prophecies relating to God's dealings with His people must have been fulfilled, and the remainder must have culminated with the advent of the Messiah. He, the Christ of God, would then continue the revelation of God to the world. This, in brief detail, seems to be what the Writer of the Hebrew letter is saying to us.

There are those who argue that prophecies may only be interpreted in *one* way. The argument goes something like this; if any prophecy is said to be literal, then *all* prophecies must be literally interpreted. If any prophecy is said to be figurative, then *all* must be figuratively interpreted. But in his book 'Prophecy and Premillennialism', J.D. Bales says, "Is this not an arbitrary and unfair approach which will cut one off from the truth, not only in the Bible, but in every other book?" Indeed, we can understand that this statement must be true, but in addition to this the Writer of the Hebrew letter says quite categorically that God spoke through the prophets '*in various ways*', so to all intents and purposes the matter should be settled; there are more ways than one. We now need to enquire as to what those ways are.

Before we do this, it is as well to note that the phrase 'last days' does not refer to the end of time but to the Christian or Gospel dispensation which, of course, is still with us. God no longer speaks to *us* through the prophets, but by His Son.

Literal Predictions

I think it is helpful to say what we mean by 'literal'; the Oxford Dictionary says, 'taking words in their usual or primary sense without mysticism, allegory, or metaphor': thus, literal Israel means the nation of Israel, as literal Jerusalem means the city of that name. What we can say, then, is that literal predictions ought to be interpreted as descriptions of coming events.

Take, for instance, the words of Deuteronomy chapter 28. It is quite evident that in the opening verses of that chapter God is indicating to His chosen people the blessings which would accrue to them if they obeyed Him. Conversely, in verse 15 we read, "However, if you do not obey the Lord your God and do not carefully follow all his commands and decrees I am giving you today, all these curses will come upon you and overtake you"; there then follows a catalogue of the curses. These curses indicate *literal* catastrophes and should be interpreted literally.

Similarly, we read in Isaiah chapter 13 a prophecy against Babylon which should be interpreted literally. In verse 17 we read, "See, I will stir up against them the Medes, who do not care for silver and have no delight in gold". Isaiah then goes on, "Babylon, the jewel of kingdoms, the glory of the Babylonian pride, will be overthrown by God like Sodom and Gomorrah" (v19).

These, and others, are literal predictions as to what should happen, and did happen, to these two great nations. It is the duty of the interpreter and expositor to decide when a literal interpretation should be given.

Figurative Language

It is also true that some prophecies use figurative or symbolic language. Take for instance, the heart. When the Word says that someone's heart was 'hardened' it does not mean that the heart of a person literally takes on the quality of a stone; naturally and normally the heart is always the fleshy organ it was and is. Hardness of the heart is a *figurative* expression. How could we literally interpret the words of Joel, "rend your heart, and not your garments, and turn unto the Lord your God" (Joel 2:13).

Furthermore, how would we deal with 'self-sacrifice' if we were to give 'sacrifice' its literal meaning as applied to the Levitical priesthood? We are aware, as regards this, that we are speaking metaphorically of the body of a believer, presented to God as a living sacrifice. (See Rom. 12:1). We understand that when we speak of the death,

burial, and resurrection of the believer, we are using figurative language which means being dead to sin, immersed in water, and rising to walk in the new life.

Isaiah chapter 40 is a good example of prophecy in figurative or symbolic language. (vv 3-5). It must be quite obvious to the discerning reader that John the Baptist did not go about making motorways and highways in the desert; no, he was preparing mens' hearts and minds for the coming of Jesus. We could go on citing such examples, but suffice it to say that prophecy was given using figurative or symbolic language as well as literal.

Type and Antitype

This is another of the 'various ways' in which the prophets revealed God's will. 'Type' in the Bible prefigures an event or person of a much later time which is referred to as the 'antitype'. In the O.T. the type is referred to as the 'shadow' of the reality which is to come. In col. 2:16-17, we read, "Therefore do not let anyone judge you by what you eat or drink, or with regard to a religious festival, a New Moon celebration or a Sabbath day. These are a shadow of the things that were to come; the reality, however, is found in Christ". (N.I.V.). Concerning the work of Christ we read, 'For Christ did not enter a man-made sanctuary that was only a copy of the true one; he entered into heaven itself, now to appear for us in God's presence" (Heb. 9:24. N.I.V.).

Perhaps the most crucial of these examples is that of King David being the O.T. type and the Messiah, Jesus Christ, the N.T. antitype. It is crucial because it illustrates the principle underlying the interpretation of the literal and non-literal. The prophecy of Ezekiel (37:24-27; and 34:24-26) is taken by some to mean that literal Israel will occupy again as a united nation the literal Promised Land, and that literal King David will again sit on a literal throne on earth presiding over the nation. This is standard pre-millennial teaching. However, if we examine carefully what Peter said on the Day of Pentecost a different picture emerges (See Acts 2:25-36). If we paraphrase what Peter said it goes something like this.

Let me talk to you about the patriarch David. He died, was buried, and his tomb is with us to this day; David did not ascend to heaven. But David was a prophet and he said 'Therefore my heart is glad and my tongue rejoices; my body also will live in hope, because you will not abandon me to the grave, nor will you let your Holy One see corruption'. He spoke prophetically about the resurrection of Christ; God has raised Him up and we are all witnesses of that *fact*. David did not ascend into heaven but he said, 'The Lord (God) said to my Lord (Christ) sit at my right hand until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet'. Now I want all you Israelites to know that God has made the Jesus whom you crucified both Lord and Christ. King David once reigned, he died, he was buried, and he is in his tomb to this day. Jesus was crucified, buried, and resurrected; He now sits on the throne in Heaven from whence He reigns over His Kingdom, the church. David was the type; Jesus was the antitype.

Conclusion

Yes, God did speak many times and in various ways through the prophets. Sometimes He spoke literally; at other times figuratively; and yet again by type and antitype. It devolves on each one of us not to make just a cursory examination of God's Word, but to look at it in such detail that we shall be able to differentiate between the 'various ways' in which God reveals His Will?.