

## PROPHETIC INTERPRETATION

Here we are dealing with a particular form of literalistic interpretation of Scripture, whose purpose is to derive a prophetic message that can be applied to real events in human history that are of contemporary relevance and so illuminate the human condition. The procedure is as follows. These are the principles of operation:

- 1 Take Scripture as literally true.
- 2 find and add a particular application.
- 3 Interpret terms as having a literal meaning
- 4 Interpret passages as making specific claims  
Add to this a qualification
- 5 Such literal terms and sentences are to be given a special meaning to be treated as allegorical, as a kind of code, requiring a key for it to be read and rendered comprehensible. So these have something besides their literal meaning' That has to be discovered.  
Add to this a further qualification
- 6 Some terms, in particular those that might be interpreted in a figurative way, are to be so interpreted, i.e. by means of numbers (taking the term 'figurative' quite literally (!) as 'having to do with figures')
- 7 These are derived by means of a process of speculation (see below) in order to produce predictions, 'prophecies'.
- 8 These interpretations are confirmed by being accepted by the community or the immediate circle of inquirers.
- 9 Confirmation is sometimes claimed on the basis of unusual psychological or other unusual phenomena associated with the receipt and delivery of the interpretations.

### Ad hoc derivation of doctrine.

Edson gives us an example of how to arrive at 'truth' ad hoc style. We can note several steps.

- 1 Let the book, in this case scripture, fall open and note where it falls, believing that the topic you have found is of crucial importance for development and postulating that God guided you to that page.
- 2 Take what strikes you on that page as particularly interesting as the revelation of God. You will have to decide what on the open page is significant, of course.
- 3 Employ it as a decisive guide to new doctrine.
- 4 Let the company, or representative members of that company decide if God had revealed it. And the system to which it gave rise. They will evaluate the proposals you make for new doctrine. Their acceptance is the crucial thing.
- 5 If there is something unusual take it as a token of God's action. Edson speaks of his condition as 'like a dream'.

Questions:

Why should the way I arrive at my conclusion guarantee that that conclusion is true? Edson's comment that he was 'as if in a vision' is nicely vague. But even if

there is a vision, so what? It is the content that has to be examined. With Edson's heavenly sanctuary there is no way of doing that. Why should the psychological condition of the interpreter be accepted as positively significant and taken as giving support to the claim for divine origin of the resultant teaching, confirming that it is not simply true but is divine truth, divinely given! There are logical and other procedures for establishing whether claims are justifiable and rational.

## SPECULATION

First we define the meaning of the word.

The terms 'speculation', 'speculate', 'speculative' have reference to

- (1) **words, concepts:** e.g. boojams, fairies, light years, ether, epicycles, neutrons. We can ask: Are there such things? Is the concept fruitful? Does the idea lead to increased understanding?
- (2) **propositions:** e.g. 'There are fairies at the bottom of my garden'. We ask: 'Is the proposition worthy of consideration, of belief? Is there evidence for it?

In what follows we use the term 'proposition' as it is often used in common parlance to stand for a sentence that is making a claim, stating a belief, or is a subject of knowledge. More strictly in the language of logic the term 'proposition' stands for what the sentence expresses. The proposition is what the subject believes, knows. It is what he expresses in his statement.

- (3) **processes of reasoning, exposition, lines of argument.** So it might be illustrated by a variety of examples from Ptolemy and Augustine to Einstein and Tillich. Ptolemy argued to the conclusion that given that the orbits of planets were cyclical, a worthy explanation was to be arrived at by adjusting the orbits by means of epicycles to make them correspond to actual observations of planets in motion.

Augustine's argument about resurrection reaches the astonishing conclusion that God will restore to the deceased the original body whatever has happened to it.

In each of these examples the term 'speculation' has reference to a complete process of thinking, of exposition. Since there are ground rules that serve us to judge whether an exposition is or is not rational we ask the question, 'Does the set of propositions present a reasonable argument?' or (rephrasing it), 'Is it a sound argument?'

What is **Speculation**? A first step might be to suggest synonyms such as: guessing, surmising, supposition, opinion, postulation, hypothesis. A reasonable speculation might be a stage on the way to a justifiable belief or to knowledge, but it has not attained that status yet. We consider a speculation to be reasonable by the very fact that we take it with a degree of seriousness, the degree varying from casual to intense. We say 'That's 'mere speculation', when it will not lead to a reasonable belief, one not well grounded, so not worthy of further consideration. The expression sometimes provides a way of dismissing an unwelcome idea, claim, or argument.

Here are some synonyms:

**Speculate**

Conjecture, surmise, consider, reflect, wonder, ‘create out of whole cloth.’

**Speculative**

Suppositious, conjectural, untrustworthy, unrealistic

What happens when one speculates?

One produces a ‘speculation’, an idea, a proposition, a train of reasoning.

There are **two aspects** to the meaning of the word

**1 Contributing to, an instrument in, the process of understanding.**

The **positive** aspect of its meaning is that if we put forward this idea, this concept or proposition or claim, this line of argument, it might prove fruitful and lead to reasonable belief or knowledge, but it has not yet attained that status. While we hope that it will do so after testing, should such testing be available, we now have to hold it up to critical scrutiny. We must apply to it established and recognised ways of evaluation and testing and then decide whether it should be rejected, or accepted or not. Acceptance may involve holding it for continued scrutiny. In this sense it is equivalent to ‘hypothesis’, a term that does not bear the derogatory sense that ‘speculation’ and its cognates often do.

**2 Unworthy of further consideration.**

The **negative** overtone the term carries is that the idea, argument, proposition is *prima facie* not well founded, not worthy of further consideration, not established, open to criticism, lacking grounds, without supporting evidence, dubious, i.e. open to serious doubt, more than likely to be wrong and so to be rejected. That is its meaning when sometimes qualified as *only* speculation, *mere* speculation.

The fact that one rejects a speculation means that there is one less alternative to consider. That helps to advance our knowledge. It is not to be overlooked that the negative result may in this sense be positive in contributing to our increased understanding. But that condition is that it can do so only to the degree that the speculation is not considered patently absurd or preposterous.

It sometimes happens that what was taken as truth or reasonable belief is now judged to be **‘mere’ speculation**, or simply speculative. How does that happen? It is seen not to be rational, to be without evidence, without appropriate support. For example, it is seen that the speculation was created to give confidence, assurance to provide a way forward, e.g. to produce an as yet untested hypothesis. But if it can’t be tested, because it is only ‘theoretical’, conjecture without possible support, it is seen as worthy of rejection, as only fit to be abandoned. It would be irrational to accept, believe the proposition, or to employ the term in any constructive way. In contrast to other alternative explanations, a speculation it is seen to be lacking certain elements considered essential to support its validity or truthfulness. So a speculative proposition is not worthy of belief, or not yet worthy and may never be worthy of belief. The following are certain elements such speculation lacks: evidence, rationality, consistency with other ideas, harmony with facts.

For **Amusement, Entertainment**

What would it be like to be a crocodile?  
 What if I had five million pounds?

**Personal reflection that might be also entertaining**

‘Speculative’ sometimes = imaginative, where ‘imaginative’ hangs rather loose in reference to truth, veracity, trustworthiness.

What if I had married Josephine?  
 What if I had my time again?

**Historical**

What would have resulted if Hitler had invaded England or had been assassinated in 1941?

**Religious, doctrinal**

What would it be like to live for ever?  
 How did God create a world, a galaxy, a universe?

**Philosophical**

Are human beings free creatures?  
 What is reality?

**WHY SPECULATE?**

To solve **problems**

Who done it?  
 How to do it?

To create a **system**

To produce a **story**

To find an **interpretation** e.g. to find a means by providing concepts and arguments for exploring reality and so to assist in generating scientific or historical evidence by considering probabilities, possibilities, or for the production of philosophical or theological answers.

At the outset there may well be puzzlement and doubting as a kind of experimentation in thought is taking place. Later as thought becomes clearer and evidence is forthcoming, there are grounds for defence and for belief. The subject of the interpretation may be a particular writer, an interesting politician, a period of history, intellectual or military for example, a system in sociology or psychology.

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## HOW ADVENTISTS HAVE SPECULATED

Both William Miller and Hiram Edson adopted the idea of 'sanctuary' as one worth speculating about, and for the purpose of building a speculative system, however supported.

So we can ourselves speculate about their speculation. What would have resulted if neither had fastened with enthusiasm on the concept of 'sanctuary', itself a speculative idea when not taken historically, and in doing so produced an elaborate speculative system by employing it. What would have resulted if William Miller had not speculated about his idea of an earthly sanctuary? What if Edson and his associates had not speculated about a heavenly sanctuary?

In the case of Miller his idea of *sanctuary* is readily shown to be speculative.

1. his identification of the *concept* as a symbol of 'the whole earth'.
2. the *system* he built around the idea along with the key speculation of 'cleansing' as total destruction. That is surely a bizarre interpretation of the meaning of the term 'cleansing'.
3. the *prediction* he based on it: 'cleansing the sanctuary,' means 'destroying the earth' at one particular day in one particular year. A date arrived at by a clever system of interpreting certain numbers that occur in certain parts of scripture.

Each one of these speculations was shown to be an error, manifestly misconceived, wrong in application and factually false, untrue. In sum the idea 'sanctuary' is made the centre of attention in error; the identification of Sanctuary with earth is speculation pure and simple, the prediction based on the system based on interpretation of time spans ('2300 days', 70 weeks etc.) built around the ideas is patently speculative, and spectacularly shown to be a gross error, demonstrably false, by not taking place. In the case of the revised system and its conclusion there is no possible way of testing the conclusions. If it is false we shall never know.

What shall we say of the so-called insight of Hiram Edson?

First, he retained the idea of 'sanctuary'.

Second, he retained the structure Miller had built and employed in using the concept.

Third, retaining the idea and the system around it he simply re-identified the concept of 'sanctuary' by claiming that it is in the heavens. That is grand speculation. One cannot by any possible conceivable means make reference to activity in the heavens so as to authenticate the identity Edson gave to the concept, now to be called the 'heavenly sanctuary' and to be embellished with the imagined activity of the divinity within it. Such transcendent activity is beyond the range of our human creatures' knowledge.

What we have now said provides a very clear illustration of the definitions of 'speculation' explained above. The term stands for

1. an imaginative idea,
2. sentences expressing a claim,
3. a system built around these and sometimes,
4. the impossibility of any kind of testing.

What counts for evidence for the activity postulated within the preferred system with the elaboration of the detail both of the 'heavenly sanctuary' and of the activity of the 'high priest' within it and the definition of the activity going on 'in' the sanctuary. There is no possible way in which we can observe, or get confirmation by any empirical means. Unlike events predicted to take place in history, events speculated to occur in the transcendent sphere are beyond all possible human knowledge. We may say, 'This is what is happening!' and then go on to propose a series of 'events'. What we cannot say is 'Here is evidence for what we say is happening!' To support our proposals may require us to rely on, or even to produce, a further series of speculations.

Edson's thought plus ensuing exegetical enthusiasm to employ it resulted in the building of a face-saving system after the fiasco of the great disappointment Miller had so enthusiastically and sincerely but misguidedly expected. It proved practically impossible for many of his followers to break loose from the contours of the system he employed with its conclusion about the year 1844. Revision was deemed to provide the answer. So the result was a reworking of particular elements in his system. The resultant figure of the prophetic arithmetic was not rejected. That reworking enabled the deluded and disappointed believers to retain their faith and their hope. So further speculation, believed to be corrective, was embraced with enthusiasm and taken as grounds for faith and for hope. It still serves this function for many believers, providing, as it did then, the incentive for the development of a doctrinal system and more than one religious movement. Contemporary prophets continue to speculate.

Now a few general remarks first about attitude: there is no harm in trying out an idea, a proposition and an argument to see what results we get. We want to see if it 'works', if it turns out to be a success, to be fruitful. But how do you make a judgment about that? How do you find out whether or not it is 'purely speculative? How tell the difference between a failure and a success?

The criteria will differ: Does it please? Don't think about it. Just accept it, if it seems to meet a need fill a gap or solve a problem. Does it meet our mind? How to decide between

It's reasonable, so adopt it

It's questionable, so be critical still

It's unreasonable, so reject it.

To preserve our system we have to find another application for it or invent one. The creation of an alternative or a revised application of elements of the original speculation demands further speculation. Hopefully it produces creative results, but if with due consideration it proves to be 'mere speculation' the unworthy results may be rejected, or just become a curious, or an unworthy and perhaps forgotten piece of history.

But then we may have to re-assess the process of interpretation that led us on to produce the original in the first instance. Perhaps that had been the product of misguided speculation, or speculation without due guidance, however we may have valued and assessed it.

One speculative system can support another speculative system producing –to use an analogy - a square within a square. Find or produce (manufacture?) evidence, support for the speculation; produce a set of speculations and find support for them in a familiar context of a previous speculative system. E.g. Edson’s speculation that the sanctuary is in ‘heaven’ led to a string of further speculations as associations, supported within the already existing system that Miller had produced.

Basic to all of this is the acceptance of a particular speculation about the Bible, as Scripture. This is an interpretation of the inspiration of the writings. It’s a twofold speculation leading to an assertion that inspiration grounds the authority of scripture on the one hand, and on the other insists that since established as authoritative the sentences of scripture, are to be taken as literally true and so when interpreted the doctrine that results has divine authority. The result of such speculation is an assertion of the undeniable authority of Scripture and also the teaching derived from it.

**One** speculative system **Fundamentalism** whose essential ingredients are a particular doctrine of biblical inspiration as ground for biblical authority coupled with a literalist interpretation of the text. This provided the means for

**Another** speculative system, a **Prophetic system** that when itself duly modified provided the means for

The **third** resultant speculative system The **millennial eschatology** with its intricate detail of concern with probation, investigative judgment, and final punishment and reward.

So we raise the problem of adequate hermeneutic: Interpret a passage: How? Biblical interpretation: just connect one text with another and another and another, no need to regard historical background, or history of transmission or opinions of knowledgeable interpreters. Pick the passage anywhere and another and another and co-ordinate what you have chosen according to a theme you are employing. When it is completed and accepted and handed down as worthy you defend it by any means you speculate will preserve it.

In my early days of philosophical study I was introduced to the idea of ‘thought experiment’, an idea well worth considering. In one way its meaning overlaps with the notion of ‘speculation’. When completed, since at the outset one is unsure whether it is a valuable exercise or not, the result must be evaluated to see if it proves to be worthy. That it may not is hinted at in the term ‘experiment’. Here it also contrasts with the term ‘speculation’ which sometimes, perhaps often, carries the overtone of being insecure, in terms of its truth value, especially as it often means ‘only speculation’, i.e. not to be taken seriously.

Take our example above. Edson’s thought about the sanctuary was by him and many of his fellow believers taken to be true, without further consideration. They did not think of it as an experimental exercise but a grasp of the truth and as such immediately worthy of belief. There was no need to test it. It provided an immediate solution to the urgent problem and the key to future developments. The basis for this they found in passages in apocalyptic scripture they considered authenticated their

speculations. They defended their interpretation of scripture by means of further speculative assertions about its authority.

The context in which the speculation emerges will often determine whether it will be taken as unquestionable or as an experiment in thought with the aim of providing the best explanation, whether the best explanation can be shown to be true or not. That raises the question of how we shall define 'truth'. It also requires us to know what it means to give a good explanation.

Further examples of Adventist speculation may be found in the non-scriptural terms they have developed and that have become intrinsic to and essential elements in the system that Adventists proudly call 'the truth', indeed the truth they alone possess. Such terms are for example: thought inspiration, verbally inspired, investigative judgment, probation, close of probation, second death, third angel's message. This is accompanied by emphatic denials of positions both of academic and ecclesiastical conclusions about Scripture, as well as antagonism to theology and philosophy.