

## THE PROPHETS: Forthtelling the character of God....

Of the hundreds of prophets which God raised up in Israel's history, we have only written collections of oracles of just sixteen prophets. The only difference between "major" and "minor" prophets is the amount of written oracles collected. Their primary role was as "enforcers of the Covenant" - they were preachers calling the people back to obedience. The prophetic books teach us much about God's character - His Holiness, Justice, Mercy, Love, Patience and His Sovereignty over the nations; as well as how He responds to our sin and disobedience.

*"The bulk of prophecy in both the earlier prophets (Joshua, Judges, Samuel and Kings), the latter prophets (Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Daniel and the twelve minor prophets), and the New Testament prophets actually involved God's messengers speaking the word of God to a contemporary culture that needed to be challenged to cease its resistance to the word of God. As such, these prophets were "forth-tellers.""* (Kaiser and Silva, An Intro to Biblical Hermeneutics, p. 139)

Prophecy can be defined as "the proclamation of that which God revealed." It is this "forth-telling" aspect rather than the "fore-telling" (prediction), that is the most basic characteristic. Prophetic revelations were not so concerned with revealing the future, but rather revealing God's will concerning the present. This understanding combined with the other basic principles of grammatical, historical and theological interpretation will take much of the mystery out of reading the prophets. The writings of the prophets were written for their contemporaries, in thought, forms and language they could understand. Even in fore-telling, *"every item of predictive prophecy was given to a particular historical people to awaken and stir them to righteousness by revealing in part what God would do in the future."* (Mickelson, Better Bible Study, p. 84)

The prophets wrote to upbuild, encourage, console, edify, rebuke, convert, warn, and instruct the people of God of their day. *"The prophets boldly rebuked vice, denounced political corruption, oppression, idolatry and moral degeneracy. They were preachers of righteousness, reformers, and revivalists of spiritual religion, as well as prophets of future judgment or blessing. They were raised up in times of crisis to instruct, rebuke, comfort and warn ISREAL, the nations, and the messianic kingdom."* (Freeman, Intro. to Old Testament Prophets, p. 14.) It is a mistake to consider biblical prophecy as a mystery to be unraveled and deciphered by future generations, or to look upon them as only having the purpose of satisfying men's curiosity about the future. God's revelation to the prophets were given to meet the needs of his people at the time they were given, and insights into the future called for responses of repentance, faith, obedience and hope.

### Historical Settings of the Prophets:

The writing prophets wrote between 760 B.C. and 460 B.C. - just 300 stormy years out of nearly 1400 years of Israel's history. The prophets spoke in large measure in the context of and to their contemporary events. These years were characterized by : unprecedented political, military economic and social upheaval; an enormous level of religious unfaithfulness and disregard for the original Mosaic covenant; and Shifts in populations and national boundaries. The nation was been divided by civil war into two kingdoms in conflict with each other and with the nations around them - both their neighbors: Edom, Ammon (Syria), Moab, and Tyre; and caught in the middle of the struggles of the superpowers: Assyria, Egypt, Babylon, and Persia.

**Obediah** and **Joel** were likely 9th Century B.C. contemporaries of Elijah and Elisha.

Three crises struck in the 8th Century: an alliance of Syria and Israel in 734 B.C.; the fall of Samaria to Assyria in 722; and the invasion of Sennacherib of Assyria in 701 B.C. **Hosea** and **Amos** were prophets in Isreal in the North, **Isaiah** to Judah in the South, **Micah** at work in both kingdoms; and **Jonah** met his whale during these times.

**Nahum** and **Habbakuk** foresaw Assyria's destruction (with the rise of Babylon), as **Zephaniah** prepared the way for reform. Judah experienced a revival under Josiah in 621 B.C. abruptly ending with his death in 609. **Jeremiah's** "weeping" ministry began with that hope, but saw the tragic decline and fall of Jerusalem in 586 B.C. before being carried off to Egypt.

**Ezekiel** (carried off to Babylon as a captive in 597 B.C.) ministered to the exiles explaining "why?" then offering hope. **Daniel's** 70 years as a prophet saw Babylon fall to Persia and far beyond them to Greece and Rome and inter-testamental times.

**Haggai, Zechariah** and **Malachi** were prophets among the remnant that returned to rebuild Jerusalem and the Temple in the times of Ezra and Nehemiah.

**Organization** - the basic literary unit is the "oracle". The prophetic books were written collections of "Oracles" - sometimes chronological, sometimes topical. Sometimes they are dated, often not. Divisions are not always clear, nor are remarks and transitions always present.

Prophecies may be:

- **Unconditional** - do not depend for fulfillment on any mortal's obedience - typically found in a covenant structure - such as the covenant with Abraham (Gen15), the Messianic prophecies and God's plan of redemption.
- **Conditional** - consequences that will result from either obedience or disobedience to God's Word - each has an "if" or "unless" attached to it. (example: Jer 18: 7-10). While primarily corporate, they may sometimes apply to individuals as well (Such as Ahab).

The bulk of the writing prophets' messages were concerned with the blessings and curses of Leviticus 26: 1- 39; Deuteronomy 4: 15- 40; and 28: 1- 32: 42:

Blessings for Covenant faithfulness: life, health, prosperity, agricultural abundance, respect and safety.

Curses for Covenant unfaithfulness: death, disease, drought, dearth, danger, destruction, defeat, deportation, destitution, and disgrace.

- **Sequential** - "now... and not yet" prophecies - placing together several events in one prediction though they are fulfilled in a sequence of events over perhaps a lengthy period. Sometimes these have both an "already fulfilled" and "not-yet-fulfilled" aspects. (1 John 1:18, 4:3)

It is important to realize the prophets have a different perspective, especially in regard to time. Events are often compressed, foreshortened, scrambled - neither - systematically or chronologically laid out. They often viewed the "mountain peaks" of God's revelation without grasping the "valleys" (long periods of time) between. A good example is the apparent confusion or overlapping of the first and second comings of Christ, even the apostles expected His return within their lifetime. And sometimes the Prophet would line up the "gunsights" of similar events, without seeing the distance between them.

The use of "prophetic perfect" should be noticed. Hebrew had no future tense- so often the tense of completed action would be used, expressing the certainty this would come to pass, Isa 9:6, 11:9, Num 24:17 are good examples: "is" should be read "will be".

## Prophetic Forms:

The prophets received their messages in a variety of ways: dreams and visions, direct revelation, at times receiving God's word while in an ecstatic state. The Scriptures are clear that there were false prophets and gives the tests for a true Prophet. The content of their messages was important. There were three basic ways they proclaimed this message from God: They preached the message, they wrote it, and at times, acted it out symbolically. In all three, it is the content that is most important. False prophets prophesied in similar ways, the difference lies not in the form it was given, but in the content contained within it.

Some of the most common written forms that oracles take include:

- **Lawsuit:** (God portrayed as plaintiff, prosecutor, judge, bailiff in a court case against Israel, the defendant) (Isa 3:13-26, Micah)
- **Woe:** (Announcement of distress, the reason, and a prediction of doom) (Hab 2:6-8; Micah 2:1-5; Zeph 2:5-7), Cf. Lamentations
- **War:** (Announces judgment as carried out through a battle: call to alarm, description of attack, prediction of defeat) (Hosea 5:8-10)
- **Promise: (Salvation Oracle)** (Reference to the future, mention of radical change, and blessing) (Amos 9:11-15; Hosea 2:16-20; 2:21-23; Isa 45:1-7; Jer 31:1-9)

**Formulas:** Some phrases are used so frequently they became technical terms: *"Thus says the Lord ... or the Word of the Lord to ..."*; *"In the latter days, ... or in the last days, ..."*; *"The day of the Lord ..."*; *"The Lord comes ..."*; *"Restore the fortunes of my people or return the captivity"*; *"The remnant shall return"* *"The dwelling (or tabernacle) of God is with men"*; and *"The kingdom of God"* are examples.

**Illusions:** There are many illusions to daily life & nature; to past events such as creation, Paradise with its rivers and trees, the flood, Sodom and Gomorrah, the Exodus, the wilderness experience with the pillar of fire and cloud, the valley of Achan, etc.; and to historical persons: Elijah, Joshua, David, etc. (Haggai 2:20-22 cf. Deut 29:23, Exo 15:1,5, Judg 7:22).

**Object lessons and Symbolic Actions:** examples: Hosea's marriage; Amos' five visions ((7-9:8); Jeremiah's linen waistband (13), the potter's jar (18, 19), baskets of figs (24); Ezekiel's "toy soldiers" (4), sleeping habits (4), shave and hair cut (5), vine allegory (15), whoring sisters allegory (25), valley of bones (37), New Temple (40ff); Daniel's statue (2), 4 beasts (7); Zechariah's myrtle trees (1), measuring line (2), gold lampstand (4), flying scroll (5), chariots (6), Joshua's crowning (6)

**Types:** an action that represents a teaching of double import: its truth was a reality to its contemporaries (the shadow), and yet it pictures an aspect of God's redemption (the reality) at the same time. Types may be events, objects, persons, things, institutions, or ceremonies. Types must: 1) be of divine origin; 2) be redemptive in focus; 3) be pictorial; and 4) be future. Most Biblical types have are identified as such by Scripture.

**Symbols:** objects from life that are used to represent concepts or ideas, past, present or future. Symbols may use persons, things, names, actions, colors, types of metals, numbers, etc. A symbol may be used for more than one thing. (The "lion" is used of both Christ and Satan; The "lamb" represents both Jesus and the lost sinner.) or a number of symbols may be used to point to the same thing. (Like "water, oil, wind," and a "dove" to the Holy Spirit; or the many "names" of Jesus the Messiah.

**Interpretation:** Two significant misconceptions about Biblical Predictions should be noted. On one hand, some, out of the rationalistic bias of our day, believe that predictions are impossible, history is governed by chance. They "explain away" biblical predictions as either lucky guesses or by dating the writing to a time after the events came to pass (history written afterwards as if it had been written before). With the God revealed in the Bible, who is sovereign and who created time, prediction is no real problem.

The other misconception is that prophecy is "history written beforehand". The prophets could only give glimpses into the future unfolding of God's purposes. *"Predictive prophecy is enigmatic. It never gives enough detail so that the prophetic sketch can be substituted for a historical summary .... Prophecy cannot be history written before hand because God does not disclose enough of the major and minor events that are essential for even an incomplete historical picture. What God makes known as well as what he withholds are both a part of the total plan of redemption."* (Mickelsen, P-85,87)

In any passage of prophetic material there are several questions to be asked. Is the passage predictive or didactic? Is it conditional or unconditional? Some of the prophecies made by the prophets depended upon the response of the people - their repentance turned away or delayed the judgment prophesied (Ninevah in Jonah for example). Is the predictive prophecy fulfilled or unfulfilled? Many O.T. prophecies have already been fulfilled either in Israel's history or in the coming of Christ. Whenever possible a prophecy should be read in the light of its fulfillment. Does the Scriptures bear witness to its fulfillment or are there multiple fulfillment's of varied degrees? (An example is Daniel's prophecy of the abomination of the temple fulfilled partly with Antiochus Epiphanes in the intertestamental period, yet to be fulfilled in the manifestation of the Anti-Christ (cf. II Thess 2).) Is the fulfillment direct or indirect? A direct prophecy is fulfilled solely in N.T. times, an indirect may have both old and New Testament fulfillment's- (an example of direct: Micah 5:2, cf. Matt 2:5,6; indirect: Zech 11:12,13 cf. Matt 26:15.) In what form will the fulfillment take?

A brief survey of approaches to this last question is important here because much confusion and error comes at this point.

Some would argue for a **"strict" literal fulfillment**, exactly as described. This approach is problematic as it would require David himself to sit on the Messiah's throne, the battle of Armageddon to be fought with horses, swords, bows and arrows, etc. Few of those who take this stance are completely consistent with it. Does a sword come out of Christ's mouth in Rev. 1:16? The more common evangelical approach calls for "literal" interpretation wherever possible. *"By literal we mean the customary and socially acknowledged meaning of the word. By figurative we mean a higher application of the literal meaning. The figurative meaning of a term or passage must be based on its literal meaning."*(Mickelsen, p. 98.) *"The classical method of seeking the literal sense of Scripture meant seeking a knowledge of what is being communicated through the various forms and figures of speech employed in biblical literature."* (Sproul, Knowing Scripture, p. 54.)

Proponents of the historical/ grammatical method recognize that the prophet spoke to his world in the terms, thought forms and concepts of that time. A prophecy concerning war and weapons would use the terms of that time, however we should read weapons and allow for modern weaponry in a yet to be fulfilled prophecy, etc. The prophets often spoke in terms of equivalents and analogy, using corresponding terms to convey their message.

Another approach to a passage would be to **"spiritualize" it**. This does not mean finding religious value in it, but that it is fulfilled in a "figurative" way . A **"mystical"** approach would be similar. Hidden within the literal are special meanings and teachings for those endowed with the perception or the key to unlock them. **"Allegorizing"** is also similar. Words are interpreted figuratively and the

imagery is identified with the things it symbolizes. Every detail has a part. The literal meaning may often be irrelevant to this. The principles of historical/ grammatical/ theological interpretation, stressing literal meaning and the analogy of faith are necessary safeguards against the unbridled speculation and subjectivistic interpretation that arise so readily out of any approach that looks for a more "figurative" interpretation.

Another approach would be to interpret in a "**symbolic**" manner as many modern existential theologians would. Whether "spiritualized" or interpreted in a mystical, allegorical, analogical or symbolic manner the great danger is two-fold. First there is no certainty because the interpretation is subjectively determined. Unless a passage is clearly shown by the rest of the Scriptures to be interpreted in a particular figurative manner, there is the constant danger of reading into meanings that are erroneous. Our confidence in our understanding must rest upon a foundation that is solid and object - such as the testimony of Scripture and not on a human speculation. The second danger is that our own particular notions become the source of our understanding and we are not under God's word any longer. A confident faith must rest on the assurance that what we believe is God's word.

In interpreting prophecy there those who would take the "strict" approach on one extreme and the "purely figurative" approach on the other. Ramm observes that "*the real issue in prophetic interpretation among evangelicals is this: can prophetic literature be interpreted by the general method of grammatical exegesis, or is some special principle necessary?*" (Ramm p. 244) Especially in the debate concerning the millennium this becomes clear. What form will the millennium take? Literal? Spiritual? figurative? Because evangelicalism, recognizes that literal and figurative have their proper places, this is not clear cut. We must be sensitive to how we interpret the passages related to eschatological times and how we justify those interpretations.

Ramm, Michelsen and Berkhof have discussions of the principles and difficulties in interpreting prophecy. Some of the basic rules of interpretation they suggest.

1. The basic principles should be applied in determining meanings, historical context, comparison with other passages, etc. Carefully study the prophet and his situation.
2. The interpreter should take the words in their usual literal sense unless it is clearly indicated to interpret them otherly by implicit or explicit teaching of the Scriptures. "*The interpreter should take the literal meaning of a prophetic passage as his limiting or controlling guide.*" "*Interpret prophecy literally unless the implicit or explicit teaching of the New Testament suggests typological interpretation*" (Ramm, pp. 253, 266)
3. "*In studying the figurative descriptions that are found in the prophets, the interpreter should make it his aim to discover the fundamental idea expressed*" (Berkhof, pp. 152-153) Careful consideration must be made of what meaning the passage had to the original readers. Would our interpretation have made sense to them?
4. "*In the interpretation of the symbolical actions of the prophets, the interpreter must proceed on the assumption of their reality, i.e., their occurrence in actual life, unless the connection clearly proves the contrary.*" (Berkhof)
5. "*The fulfillment of some of the most important prophecies is germinant., i.e., they are fulfilled by installments, each fulfillment being a pledge of that which is to follow*". (Berkhof)
6. Prophecies should be read in the light of their fulfillment, and the centrality of Jesus Christ must be kept in mind in all prophetic interpretation. "*Moreover, he should not proceed on the assumption that prophecies are always fulfilled in the exact form in which they were uttered. The presumption is that, if they are fulfilled in a later dispensation, the dispensational form will be disregarded in the fulfillment.*" (Berkhof, P.153, cf. Ramm pg 260.)