

## INTRODUCTION TO THE PROPHETIC BOOKS

Abraham Heschel said, "To be a prophet is both a distinction and an affliction." Read through the Bible and you will soon discover prophets were sometimes listened to, usually challenged, often ignored, and asked by God to do some crazy things. To be a mouthpiece for God held great honor and responsibility.

### THE PROPHET

Prophets in the Old Testament are known by a couple different terms and often referred to interchangeably.

- *Nabi'* = one who would speak the word of God (Deut. 18:15)
- *Ro'eh* = "seer" (1 Sam. 9:9)
- *Hozeh* = "seer" or "prophet" (Is. 30:10)

Deuteronomy 18:15-22 describes the role and responsibilities of the prophet:

- God will raise up prophets (***Called & authorized by God***)
- God's words are in the prophet's mouth (***Spoke God's words***)
- Must speak what God commands (***Expected to obey***)
- Will die for words spoken in God's name that were presumptuous, not commanded, spoken in the name of other gods, or isn't fulfilled

Prophets addressed specific situations throughout time, so their messages varied somewhat. However, they spoke consistent theological truths of God's sovereignty, justice, righteousness, and covenant loyalty (Is. 1:16-17; Amos 5:24; Mic. 6:8).

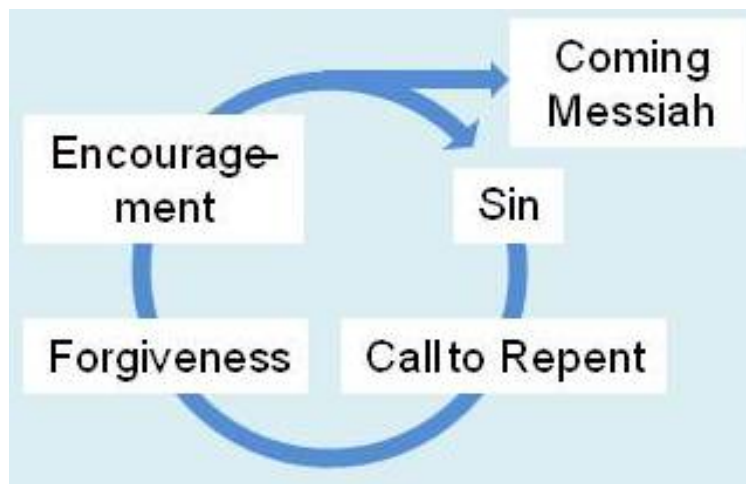


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As God’s mouthpieces, you see prophets performing three main functions: (J. Hampton Keathley, III, “Concise Old Testament Survey”)

- **Preachers** – taught and interpreted Mosaic law; rebuking sin and calling for repentance
- **Predictors** – announced coming judgment, deliverance, and events related to the Messiah and His kingdom; demonstrate God’s knowledge and control of the future
- **Watchmen** – warning of religious apostasy, political & military alliances, religious ritual

“The prophets in Israel occupied the role of a *royal diplomat or prosecuting attorney*, indicting the nation for violations of the Mosaic covenant.” (Keathley, “Concise Old Testament Survey”)

### THE PROPHETIC BOOKS

Hebrew Scriptures categorize the Nevi’im (Prophets) as Joshua-Kings for the “Former Prophets,” an explanation of Israel’s history as prophesied by Moses in Deuteronomy, and the “Latter Prophets” consisting of Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and the Twelve Minor Prophets (Hosea-Malachi).

Protestant Bibles group Isaiah-Daniel as “Major Prophets,” and Hosea-Malachi as “Minor Prophets.” The separation of major and minor has nothing to do with the prophet’s importance, but rather the length of writing.

The Major and Minor prophets cover period of more than 400 years (approx. 850 B.C. to 425 B.C.), before the exiles of Israel (northern kingdom) and Judah (southern kingdom) through the remnant’s return to Jerusalem.

Prophets Before the Exile		Exile Prophets	Prophets After the Exile
<u>To Israel:</u> Amos (760) Hosea (755)	<u>To Judah:</u> Joel (835)  Isaiah (740) Micah (735) Zephaniah (630) Jeremiah (627)	<u>To Jews in Babylon:</u>  Daniel (605)  Ezekiel (592)	<u>To the remnant after returning:</u>  Haggai (520) Zechariah (520) Malachi (432)

# GUIDELINES FOR INTERPRETING PREDICTIVE PROPHECY

*Taken from "The International Inductive Study Bible"*

From Genesis to Revelation the Bible is filled with prophecy. If you want to handle the prophecies in the Word of God accurately, the following guidelines will give you some important parameters.

The Greek word for prophecy, *propheteia*, comes from two Greek words:

- *Pro* = "forth"
- *Phemi* = "to speak"

It means to speak forth the mind and counsel of God. According to this definition, all Scripture is in a sense prophecy.

## PREDICTIVE PROPHECY

Predictive prophecy points to a future fulfillment and is of divine origin. In *Understanding and Applying the Bible*, Dr. Robertson McQuilkin says: "There are two purposes for predictive prophecy. The chief purpose is to affect the conduct of those who hear the prophecy. Another purpose is met only when the prophecy is fulfilled. That purpose is to build forth, to establish confidence in the God who miraculously foretold events (John 13:19; 14:29; 16:4)."

Some scholars divide predictive prophecy into two categories:

- **Forthtelling** = contain a message about the present or immediate time; often a call to godly living in the light of prophecy yet to be fulfilled.
- **Foretelling** = contains a message about what God will do in the future.

When a prophet spoke for God, the prophecy could refer to the following:

- Present or near fulfillment
- Future fulfillment
- Twofold fulfillment: a near fulfillment and then a later, future fulfillment

As you read the prophecies of the Bible, keep in mind the following guidelines, and discern whether the prophecy refers to:

- Prophet's own time and/or a future time
- Captivity and/or restoration of Israel or Judah
- First coming of Christ and any events connected with it
- Second coming of Christ
- Last days or end times

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## **TIME INTERVALS & CHRONOLOGICAL ORDER**

Prophets did not always indicate intervals of time between events, nor did they always write their prophecies in chronological order. For example, and Old Testament prophecy could include the first and second comings of Christ without any indication of the time span between the two comings. One such prophecy is found in Isaiah 65:17-25. In this prophecy, Isaiah first talks about the new heavens and the new earth (in which we know there is no death), and then in verses 18-25 he refers to a time when a youth dies at age 100 and the wolf and lamb lie down together. Chronologically, verse 17 will be fulfilled *after* verses 18-25 become a reality.

## **APPROACH PROPHECY LITERALLY**

Begin with a literal interpretation of prophecy (in its usual, ordinary meaning) UNLESS one of the following occurs:

- Grammatical context shows that it is figurative language by the use of similes, metaphors, parables, allegories, symbols, or types.
- Violates common sense
- Contradicts what the author is saying (author's main point)
- Contrary to what the rest of Scripture says

When a prophetic passage cannot be taken literally, look for what the author is trying to convey through figurative or symbolic language. To discern what the author is saying, look for answers in the following places:

- Within the context of the book
- Any other writings of the author
- Other prophetic writings to which the author had access (for example, other prophetic books or passages in the Word of God)

## **CONSIDER HISTORICAL CONTEXT**

Remember that God was delivering His prophecy to a particular people at a particular time. Granted, it might have been a prophecy with a future fulfillment, but it would still be delivered in a way that was comprehensible to those receiving that prophecy – even though they might not understand the details, symbolism, or full implications of the prophecy. Remember also that often when a prophet refers to future events, future tense may not be used.

Make a careful historical and cultural analysis of the text. Determine the identity of all historical events, proper names, and geographical locations before you attempt to interpret the text.

## **PROPHETIC MEANING**

The meaning of a specific prophecy could not always be understood by the prophet or by the people who heard the message. For example, Daniel could not understand what he had written, since it was to remain sealed until the end time (Dan. 12:8-9). However, many prophecies will come to light through the following:

- Fulfillment as recorded in history
- Fulfillment as recorded in the New Testament
- An explanation given by an Old Testament or New Testament writing (for example, Acts 4:24-28).

## **POINTING TO OLD TESTAMENT**

Many New Testament prophecies include Old Testament quotations and allusions. Scholars estimate that at least 350 Old Testament quotations or allusions appear in the book of Revelation alone. Revelation is replete with the language of Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Daniel, and the minor prophets. It is obvious that the author of Revelation was steeped in the Old Testament, for he talks in Old Testament phraseology. So, to correctly interpret New Testament prophecy, check Old Testament cross-references.

## **PHRASES OF TIME**

Watch for phrases which indicate periods of time. For example, look for:

- In the last days
- Day of the Lord
- Day of wrath
- End of the age

When you come across phrases such as these, carefully observe the things which occur during that particular time period. Then ask the following questions:

- Have these events ever occurred in history?
- Do these events coincide with any other particular period of time?
- Do these events parallel any events mentioned in another place in the Word of God?