

## Principles of Prophecy

**Introduction:** I was deeply grieved to hear a woman on the radio speaking about end-time events. She was convinced that there will be soon be a third temple in Jerusalem. She spent a lot of time talking about a red heifer with no more than two white hairs, and how an evil person called the Antichrist would make a treaty with Israel but break it after three and a half years. She insisted that signs of the impending Second Coming are all around us, but that the church was sleeping and was missing those signs just as the Jews missed the first coming. She was especially agitated about the dangers of what she called replacement theology.

To even *begin* to understand end-time events, one needs to first understand prophecy and how it works. Today I want to help you detect the worst errors when you hear them on the radio.

### 1. What is Prophecy?

The word prophecy is transliterated from the Greek word *prophéteia*; in general, *pro* means before (protrude) and *phéteia* means to speak. If we translate the word *prophéteia* (rather than transliterate it) we might use the word prediction. A prophecy is a prediction or forecast. Related to the word prophecy is the word prophet. "Prophets foretell future events".<sup>1</sup>

#### a) Fore-Telling

The most obvious idea behind prophecy is that of fore-telling future events. For example:

ESV **Acts 11:27** ... prophets came down from Jerusalem to Antioch. And one of them named Agabus stood up and foretold by the Spirit that there would be a great famine over all the world (this took place in the days of Claudius).

#### b) Forth-Telling

Don't simply think of prophets as people who only told the future. The Greek lexicon defines a prophet as "a proclaimer and interpreter of divine revelation."<sup>2</sup> A prophet was a spokesman for God who proclaimed *and expounded* divine revelation.<sup>3</sup> In fact, prophets were forth-tellers more than they were fore-tellers, because an isolated prophecy was no ineffective unless the prophet used it to motivate people to obedience or faith or worship.

ESV **Acts 15:32** ... Judas and Silas, who were themselves prophets, encouraged and strengthened the brothers with many words.

The content of the Old Testament prophetic books consists mainly of sermons of judgment based on the Law of Moses. The prophets were moved by God to read the Law, were given divine

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<sup>1</sup> Bauer, Arndt, Gingrich, Danker, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979), 724.

<sup>2</sup> Bauer, *Lexicon*, 723.

<sup>3</sup> Colin Brown, *New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, Vol. III (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1981), 81.

insight into the nation's disobedience, and then were inspired to warn them to repent. They called the nation to obedience. They were like Bible cops who sought to enforce the Law. The few predictions of the future that are sprinkled throughout their sermons served as incentives to obedience.

**Sum:** Biblical prophecy was based on personal, direct, divine revelation that involved both predictions about the future and the proclamation of divine truth.

## 2. Why is Prophecy? What is the Purpose of Prophecy?

The relatively few Old Testament prophecies sprinkled throughout the long sermons of judgment were given:

**a) To Prove the Prophet's Authority as Genuine Spokesman for God:** Most of the prophecies of the Bible were fulfilled within the lifetimes of the original audience and thus have already been fulfilled. This of course verified that the prophet was a genuine spokesman for God. In that sense, most Bible prophecies are like a spent bullet—it's already been fired; the gun power has been ignited, the lead projectile is gone, and all that is left is the empty brass casing.

**The holy books of other religions don't typically contain prophecy to the extent the Bible does. Why is that?** All other religions are false religions. Any prophecy in them would not be from God and would likely not come true. One mark of a false prophet is failed prophecy. Failed prophecy in a fake holy book would prove it to be a false religion.

ESV **Deuteronomy 18:21b-22** 'How may we know the word that the LORD has not spoken?'—when a prophet speaks in the name of the LORD, if the word does not come to pass or come true, that is a word that the LORD has not spoken; the prophet has spoken it presumptuously. You need not be afraid of him.

**b) To strengthen our faith today as we look back on various fulfillments.** For example, there are many prophecies in the Old Testament concerning the coming of the Messiah: it is predicted **where** he would be born (Bethlehem), **when** he would minister (the 70 weeks of Daniel), **how** he would be born (virgin birth), his **betrayal** for 30 pieces of silver (Zech 11:12), how he would **die** (crucifixion, Ps 22:16, 18), that none of his **bones** would be broken (Ps 34:20), and that he would be buried in a **rich man's** tomb (Isa 53:9).

Prophecy is quite useful in apologetics. Paul offered fulfilled prophecy about Jesus to add an apologetic emphasis to his salvation testimony:

ESV **Acts 26:22-23** ... I stand here testifying both to small and great, saying nothing but what the prophets and Moses said would come to pass: that the Christ must suffer and that, by being the first to rise from the dead, he would proclaim light both to our people and to the Gentiles.

**c) As Incentives to Action (Repentance or Consolation or Faith).** Jonah is a classic example of a prophet sent by God to warn people to repent lest they be destroyed.

ESV **Jonah 3:4-5** Jonah ... called out, "Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!" And the people of Nineveh believed God. They called for a fast and put on sackcloth, from the greatest of them to the least of them.

**Insight:** Jonah's prophecy is a case where the predicted disaster was avoided because the people obeyed the message and repented. It was a conditional prediction. It was sometimes possible for a prophecy of doom to be avoided, much as Scrooge asked of the Spirit of Christmas Yet to Come, "Are these the shadows of things that must be, or are they the shadows of things that MIGHT be?"

ESV **Jonah 3:10** When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil way, God relented of the disaster that he had said he would do to them, and he did not do it.

It was around 750 B.C. when Jonah went to Nineveh. Over time, the Assyrians grew evil again. They attacked and destroyed the Northern kingdom of Israel in 722 B.C. They oppressed the southern kingdom of Judah. Finally, about 100 years after Jonah, God sent another prophet, Nahum, to again predict Nineveh's destruction. Nahum's prophecies were made around 650 B.C. and the city was destroyed in 612 B.C. (by the Babylonians). Unlike Jonah's message, Nahum's message offered no hope for redemption for Assyria. It was an extended taunt. However, it did offer consolation to the oppressed kingdom of Judah.

ESV **Nahum 1:1-2** An oracle concerning Nineveh ... The LORD is a jealous and avenging God; the LORD is avenging and wrathful; the LORD takes vengeance on his adversaries and keeps wrath for his enemies.

ESV **Nahum 1:15** [to encourage Judah] Behold, upon the mountains, the feet of him who brings good news, who publishes peace! Keep your feasts, O Judah; fulfill your vows, for never again shall the worthless pass through you; he is utterly cut off.

ESV **Nahum 2:1-2** [to encourage Judah] ... the LORD is restoring the majesty of Jacob as the majesty of Israel, for plunderers have plundered them and ruined their branches.

ESV **Nahum 2:13a** Behold, I am against you, declares the LORD of hosts ...

ESV **Nahum 3:1-3** Woe to the bloody city, all full of lies and plunder—no end to the prey! The crack of the whip, and rumble of the wheel, galloping horse and bounding chariot! Horsemen charging, flashing sword and glittering spear, hosts of slain, heaps of corpses, dead bodies without end- they stumble over the bodies!

### 3. How to Interpret Prophecy

A mistake many Christians make is to read a prophecy from a modern perspective, think they understand it, and come to false conclusions. Interpreting prophecy is never easy, but observing a few basic rules of prophecy will save us from a host of errors.

**a) Understand that prophecy often uses hyperbole.** Bible prophecy always has a literal meaning, but that literal meaning is often clothed hyperbole, just as other genres of biblical literature use hyperbole.

**What is hyperbole?** *Hyper* means beyond and *ballo* means to throw. It means to throw beyond, an over-reach, a deliberate exaggeration for emphasis, an over-shooting. Examples:

ESV **Nahum 1:4-6** He rebukes the sea and makes it dry ... The mountains quake before him; the hills melt; the earth heaves before him, the world and all who dwell in it ... the rocks are broken into pieces by him.

ESV **Isaiah 13:1, 9-10, 13** The oracle concerning Babylon ... Behold, the day of the LORD comes, cruel, with wrath and fierce anger, to make the land a desolation and to destroy its sinners from it. For the stars of the heavens and their constellations will not give their light; the sun will be dark at its rising, and the moon will not shed its light fire ... Therefore I will make the heavens tremble, and the earth will be shaken out of its place ...

ESV **Ezekiel 32:2, 7-8** Son of man, raise a lamentation over Pharaoh king of Egypt ... When I blot you out, I will cover the heavens and make their stars dark; I will cover the sun with a cloud, and the moon shall not give its light. All the bright lights of heaven will I make dark over you, and put darkness on your land, declares the Lord GOD.

ESV **Micah 1:1-4** The word of the LORD ... concerning Samaria and Jerusalem ... behold, the LORD is coming ... the mountains will melt under him, and the valleys will split open ...

ESV **Micah 1:6b** I will make Samaria a heap in the open country, a place for planting vineyards, and I will pour down her stones into the valley and uncover her foundations.

ESV **Micah 3:12b** Zion shall be plowed as a field; Jerusalem shall become a heap of ruins, and the mountain of the house a wooded height.

ESV **Matthew 24:1-2** Jesus left the temple and was going away, when his disciples came to point out to him the buildings of the temple. But he answered them, "You see all these, do you not? Truly, I say to you, there will not be left here one stone upon another that will not be thrown down."

ESV **Matthew 24:29** Immediately after the tribulation of those days the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will fall from heaven, and the powers of the heavens will be shaken.

Some say that since this did not literally happen in A.D. 70, there awaits in the future a double of Matthew 24. They look for a third temple to be built and destroyed.

### What does it mean to take the Bible literally?

**Literal:** Skeptics sneer, "You don't take the Bible literally, do you?" When they ask this, they are often reflecting a bias that the Bible is full of errors, that it is not to be taken seriously, and that its authority is subject to modern man's wisdom and discernment. They think the Bible reflects a limited world view, has frequent ethical inconsistencies and is full of contradictory teachings. They may see the Bible as a source of advice or encouragement, but not a binding rule book, not a book that contains dictations from God, and not a word from God to all peoples in all places and all times. Really it is an authority issue.

In contrast to the skeptics, believers do take the Bible literally. In general, that means we take it seriously and submit to its authority. For example, Muslims call Christians people of the book. By literal we sometimes mean we can trust it as the inspired Word of God.

Our word literal is from the Latin *litera*, which means letter. It is also the basis for our word literature. To interpret the Bible literally is not only to believe what it says but it is to interpret it as literature. The Bible has different types of literature in it: historical narrative, poetry, didactic epistles and prophecy. As literature, it contains facts, metaphors, allegories, similes, personifications, hyperbole, irony and euphemisms.<sup>4</sup>

To understand the Bible literally means we interpret it according to its *sensus literalis*, its literal sense. It means we interpret the bible according to the normal rules of grammar, speech, syntax and context. It is inspired by God but it does not contain magical phrases or have wildly speculative allegorical meanings. A verb is still a verb and a noun is still a noun.

**The Point:** To interpret prophecy according to the historical-grammatical approach means we realize prophetic literature is often clothed in exaggeration and symbolism.

**A Literal Problem:** One problem first-century Jewish leaders had is that they sometimes wrongly tried to interpret prophecy too literally. Here is an example when Jesus used a metaphor that was misinterpreted:

ESV **John 2:19-21** Jesus answered them, "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up." The Jews then said, "It has taken forty-six years to build this temple, and will you raise it up in three days?" But he was speaking about the temple of his body. When therefore he was raised from the dead, his disciples remembered that he had said this, and they believed the Scripture and the word that Jesus had spoken.

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<sup>4</sup> R C Sproul, *Knowing Scripture* (Downers Grove: IL: InterVarsity Press, 1977), 48.

**b) Realize that much Bible prophecy has already been fulfilled.**

Less than 5% of Old Testament prophecy specifically predicted the New Covenant.  
Less than 2% of Old Testament prophecy is messianic.  
Less than 1% of Old Testament prophecy concerns events yet to come.<sup>5</sup>

Prophecy does indeed concern the future, but it usually concerns the immediate future of those to whom it was given, such as the ancient Israelites or one of the nations surrounding the Promised Land. *Most Bible prophecy concerned their future, not our future.*

**Example:** The predicted destruction of Nineveh.

When we read Old Testament prophecies, we are often reading predictions that were future for them but are past for us. The Old Testament prophets were spokesmen for God to their generations, not ours.

**Flood Example:**

ESV **Genesis 6:11-17** ... God said to Noah, "I have determined to make an end of all flesh, for the earth is filled with violence ... Behold, I will destroy them with the earth ... I will bring a flood of waters upon the earth to destroy all flesh in which is the breath of life under heaven. Everything that is on the earth shall die."

No one expects this flood prophecy to be fulfilled in our future. It has already been fulfilled, in their future. It was future to them but it is past to us.

**Time Indicators:** When interpreting prophecy, look for a time frame given by the prophet himself for its fulfillment.

ESV **Jonah 3:4** "Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!"

**What prophetic time frame is found in Matthew 16:21?**

ESV **Matthew 16:21** ... Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised.

**Truth:** Many prophecies about Jesus' return refer not to His future appearing in person (the Second Coming) but rather to something else, such as his coming in judgment against Jerusalem in A.D. 70.

ESV **Matthew 16:28** ... there are some standing here who will not taste death until they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom.

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<sup>5</sup> Gordon Fee & Douglas Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth*, 1st ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982), 150.

ESV **Matthew 24:34** ... this generation will not pass away until all these things take place.

ESV **James 5:9** ... behold, the Judge is standing at the door.

ESV **1 Peter 4:7** The end of all things is at hand ...

ESV **Revelation 1:1** The revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave him to show to his servants the things that must soon take place.

ESV **Revelation 3:11** I am coming soon.

ESV **Revelation 22:10** ... Do not seal up the words of the prophecy of this book, for the time is near.

**Review:** Much Bible prophecy is now history.

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**c) Consider historic Christian orthodoxy. Be humble in your own interpretation of Prophecy.**

Prophecy is not an easy subject. Be bold only on those few points of yet-future prophecy the church of history has agreed upon.

**What unfulfilled prophecies are reflected in the Apostles' Creed?**

1. I believe in God the Father, Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth:
2. And in Jesus Christ, his only begotten Son, our Lord:
3. Who was conceived by the Holy Ghost, born of the Virgin Mary:
4. Suffered under Pontius Pilate; was crucified, dead and buried: He descended into hell:
5. The third day he rose again from the dead:
6. He ascended into heaven, and sits at the right hand of God the Father Almighty:
7. **From thence he shall come to judge the quick and the dead:**
8. I believe in the Holy Ghost:
9. I believe in the holy catholic church: the communion of saints:
10. The forgiveness of sins:
11. **The resurrection of the body:**
12. **And the life everlasting. Amen.**

The **Nicene Creed** has this prophecy in it: Jesus "shall come again, with glory, to judge the quick and the dead; whose kingdom shall have no end." Later on, it says: "I look for the resurrection of the dead, and the life of the world to come." That's all it has: **1)** Jesus will return; **2)** future judgment; **3)** the dead will resurrect.

The **Athanasian Creed** says that Jesus "ascended into heaven ... From thence He shall come to judge the quick and the dead. At whose coming all men shall rise again with their bodies; and shall give account of their own works. And they that have done good shall go into life everlasting and they that have done evil into everlasting fire."

### The 1<sup>st</sup> London Baptist Confession:

Article XX ~ ... He shall come in glory to reign among His saints, when He shall put down all rule and authority under His feet ...

Article LII ~ THERE shall be a resurrection of the dead, both of the just and unjust, and everyone shall give an account of himself to God, that every one may receive the things done in his body, according to that he hath done, whether it be good or bad.

### The Baptist Faith and Message of 2000:

X. Last Things—God, in His own time and in His own way, will bring the world to its appropriate end. According to His promise, Jesus Christ will return personally and visibly in glory to the earth; the dead will be raised; and Christ will judge all men in righteousness. The unrighteous will be consigned to Hell, the place of everlasting punishment. The righteous in their resurrected and glorified bodies will receive their reward and will dwell forever in Heaven with the Lord.

**Summary:** The few end times events most all churches today and throughout history have agreed upon are:

- 1) Jesus is coming back to earth from heaven (it has not happened yet).
- 2) The dead will resurrect bodily upon Jesus' re-entry to earth.
- 3) Jesus' return will be in order to judge both those alive at His coming and those already dead.
- 4) Some will be sent into everlasting life and others into everlasting fire.

**Perspective:** There is nothing in the ecumenical creeds about geo-political Israel, the rapture, the millennium, earthquakes, wars, rumors of wars, the anti-Christ, seven years of tribulation, or a one world government. There are biblical prophecies about these things, but the interpretation of them was not something the church has historically agreed upon. In fact, many in the church have believed these things to be already fulfilled. Anything we conclude beyond these creedal basics must be held very humbly and without divisiveness. This humility and these basics must be our starting point and foundation point. In our humility, we must not be divisive, over-bearing or belittling of others.

**Heresy:** Things that constitute heresy and should be dived over are the false teachings that Jesus is not ever coming back, that the Second Coming has already happened and the church missed it, there is no resurrection of the dead or there is no final judgment resulting in hell for some people.

### So What?

#### What have we learned about prophecy?

1. Biblical prophecy includes *both* fore-telling and forth-telling.
2. The purposes of prophecy include validating a message as genuinely from God (fulfilled prophecy builds our faith!) and to give impetus to repentance or obedience.



3. We must read prophecy as literature—literarily—understanding that prophecy sometimes uses such figurative language as metaphor, simile and hyperbole.
4. Realize that many of the prophecies in the Bible have already been fulfilled. Look for the time indicators: 40 days, 3 days, soon, this generation, etc.
5. We should be humble in our interpretation of prophecy in light of the fact that the only prophecy the ecumenical creeds deal with is that **1)** Jesus is coming again, **2)** the dead will bodily resurrect at His coming and **3)** the resurrected dead will be judged.

**Next Week:** The best way to learn how to interpret prophecy is by examining Old Testament prophecy that everybody agrees has already been fulfilled and see how it was written.

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### Extra Material

**Who was Elijah?** He was an Old Testament prophet who ministered in the northern kingdom of Israel against Ahab and Jezebel. He ascended into heaven on a chariot of fire about 850 B.C.

**Who was Malachi?** He was the last Old Testament writing prophet and lived in Judah. Malachi wrote around 400 B.C. some 450 years after Elijah's departure.

**What did Malachi 4:5-6 predict?** It predicted that God would send Elijah back prior to the coming of the Messiah.

ESV **Malachi 4:5** "Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and awesome day of the LORD comes. And he will turn the hearts of fathers to their children and the hearts of children to their fathers, lest I come and strike the land with a decree of utter destruction."

**Four-hundred years after Malachi's prophecy, John the Baptist showed up on the scene, shattering the four-hundred years of silence between Old and New Testaments. Based on John 1:19-21 who did people think he might be?** At first they thought he might be the Messiah, and if not the Messiah then surely he was Elijah.

ESV **John 1:19-21** ... this is the testimony of John, when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, "Who are you?" He confessed, and did not deny, but confessed, "I am not the Christ." And they asked him, "What then? Are you Elijah?" He said, "I am not."

**Why would they have thought him to be Elijah (Jn 1:21)?** They thought he might literally be Elijah, sent back to earth in fulfillment of Malachi 4:5.

**According to John himself, was he literally Elijah (Jn 1:21)?** John was not literally Elijah.

**What did Jesus say about the fulfillment of Malachi's prophecy in Mark 9:11-12a?** According to Jesus, Elijah did indeed come in fulfillment of Malachi's prediction.

ESV **Mark 9:11-13** ... they asked him, "Why do the scribes say that first Elijah must come?" And he said to them, "Elijah does come first to restore all things ... I tell you that Elijah has come ..."

Jesus said Elijah had indeed already come as predicted. John said he himself was not Elijah.

**According to Jesus, how was Malachi's prophecy fulfilled (Mt 11:13-15)?** According to the Lord Jesus Himself, John the Baptist was Elijah. *Do you have ears to hear?*

ESV **Matthew 11:13-15** ... all the Prophets and the Law prophesied until John, and if you are willing to accept it, he is Elijah who is to come. He who has ears to hear, let him hear.

**Who was right, John or Jesus?** Actually, they both were. Notice how Jesus qualified his declaration with “if you are willing to accept it” (Mt 11:14). No, John was not the literal reincarnation of the long-departed Elijah, so he said no. Yes, John was sent by God in fulfillment of Malachi’s prediction because John came in the spirit and power of Elijah. Thus the angel said to John’s father:

ESV **Luke 1:17** ... he [John] will go before him [Jesus] in the spirit and power of Elijah ...

**What can we learn from Jesus about interpreting prophecy?** Not all prophecy is to be taken completely literally. Someone did literally come first, before the Christ, as a fore-runner, but it was not literally Elijah.