

Hermeneutics 7 – How do we interpret prophecy?

Prophecy is one of the most (if not the most) neglected genre of Scripture. Christians rarely pick up their Bible and turn to the middle of Jeremiah and start reading. Or decide to read the book of Nahum or Zephaniah as their morning devotional.

We have the idea of prophecy that is generally a divine foretelling of future events. Warnings. That prophets primarily pronounce blessings or curses on nations for obeying or disobeying God, respectively. That is a part of their ministry.

Often times there is this aura around the prophets that they were always telling of things future and actually most of what they said is still future to us.

There are others who believe that the prophets are entirely buried in obscurity, since their messages were delivered to nations, kings, and people that don't exist anymore, so their message is irrelevant to people today.

“Prediction does not constitute the essence of prophecy.” – Daniel Doriani.

In fact, most prophecies in Scripture are about the prophet's immediate historical context. A very small percentage of prophecies are Messianic, and a very small percentage are about the last days of the earth. The OT prophets did not have the two-tiered idea of the coming of Christ and then him leaving and coming again. They saw that when Messiah/Christ came, he would establish a spiritual kingdom. We now know, living after the incarnation, that this spiritual kingdom is not yet fully consummated. The new heavens and the new earth filled with only God's people hasn't happened yet.

Berkhof defines prophecy as “the proclamation of that which God has revealed.” This definition is biblical: Amos 3:7 “Surely the Lord God will do nothing, but he revealeth his secret unto his servants the prophets.” Moses is widely considered to be the first prophet, and Elijah and Elisha as forerunners as well. We also have reference to prophet Micaiah in 1 Kings 22 (one of my favorites). Then we have a whole division of Scripture made up of prophetic books: Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Daniel, Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habbakuk,

Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi. John the Baptist is widely considered to be the last of the OT prophets.

The subject of prophecies were often:

- A. Foretelling of wars, Dan. 11
- B. Foretelling of political upheaval, Is. 45:1
- C. Foretelling the Messiah, Is. 7:14; 53; Micah 5:2 (Use KJV)
- D. Foretelling revival, Jer. 31:31-34; Eze. 37
- E. Foretelling impending doom/judgment, Jonah, Obadiah,
- F. Calling God's people to action, Haggai
- G. Reminding them of the past,
- H. Rebuking the present sins of God's people, Malachi
- I. Telling of the character of God, Is. 40-66

Denounce the continuationist view of prophecy.

From beginning to end Scriptures warns of false prophets, Deut. 18:15-18; 1 John 4:1, Jude. The continuationist view of prophecy that allows for a Christian to speak potentially erroneous "prophecies" is, in biblical terms, a false prophet. God's prophets never prophesied anything false. We could not maintain the inerrancy of Scripture if we believed that.

Guidelines for interpreting prophecy:

1. Know for whom the prophecy was originally given. Why was the Lord speaking to this people? We must note that not all of the prophets were sent to Israel or Judah. Some like Nahum and Jonah, were sent to Nineveh, the capital of Assyria. Obadiah was sent to Edom. A geographical knowledge of the Ancient Near East will help in keeping the names a nations and geographical regions from being lost on us readers. The relevancy of the message is highlighted when we read the Hebrew name and know who is being discussed in the text.

2. Why was this prophecy given?

To call Israel back to keep covenant faithfulness. To warn a nation of impending doom if they do not repent? These reasons are helpful in understanding what application the prophets have for us today. We can backslide and need to be reminded to keep faithful to the covenant. We need to be warned of the consequences of sin. Sometimes prophecies of impending judgment could be dissolved by obedience, Jer. 18:7-10, cf. Jonah 3:10.

3. Know when each prophet prophesied. See graph below. Covenant context is important for understanding why this prophet was sent of the Lord.

Figure 1: Chronology of the Writing Prophets

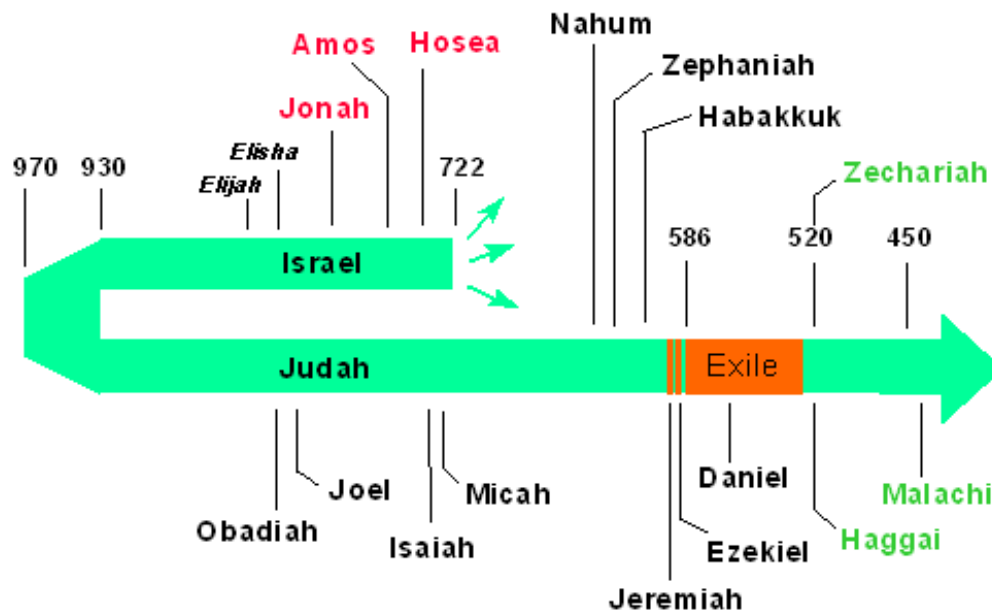


Figure 1: Chronology of the Writing Prophets

4. Don't trip over the Hebrew idioms. "Prophecy is the language of judgment, longing, and celebration. As an emotive genre, it is filled with poetic pictures and exaggerated expressions." – Robert Plummer
 Berkhof also notes: "Though the prophets often express themselves symbolically, it is erroneous to regard their language as symbolical throughout." But Berkhof also notes that "As a rule the language of the prophets should be understood literally. Exceptions to this rule must be warranted by Scripture."

The prophets frequently used objects peculiar to their historical context. Again we must emphasize that knowledge of OT lifestyles and civilization is helpful here.

5. What parallels can be drawn between the character of God in OT prophecy to make application for us today?

What attribute of God is in the foreground? When He talks about punishing a wicked people, we see His justice and His desire for holiness. When we see His covenant faithfulness, we know He will never leave His people. In the NT, one of the things that I think really excited the New Covenant writers of Scripture is they saw how faithful God was to apostate Israel. Eventually, God would abandon old covenant Israel as His people, Jer. 3:8.¹ The apostles argue from the lesser to the greater and tell the New covenant people of God, look how faithful God was to His old covenant people who only foreshadowed His new covenant people. God told us in the Old covenant that a new one was coming. And now it is here, and will be until the end! And there is no chance of God divorcing His new covenant people, the church.

6. Note Scripture passages that confirm the fulfillment of the prophecy.

Whenever God fulfills His promises, we want to note that, as it testifies to the veracity and faithfulness of our God and increases and strengthens our faith. Skeptics are floored by the accuracy of biblical prophecy, some of which are hundreds of years in advance, Is. 7:14; 53; Daniel 11.

7. Be aware of Typology:

When God “calls His Son out of Egypt” in Matt. 2:13-15, the text cites Hosea 11:1. Just as Israel was God’s son and was exiled, but brought out by God, so Jesus, God’s Son, was exiled and brought out by His Father.

8. Application of the prophets:

a. What they declared of God – many of the attributes of God are on full display in the prophets: Is. 40-66 are full of them. Eze. 36,37 show the sovereignty of God in salvation. Eze. 18 shows the justice of God in dealing with individual sinners and His mercy in exhorting sinners to come to Him.

b. The same problems the prophets decried can happen today – God’s house/worship can be neglected, as it was in the time of Haggai.

¹ Yes, I believe a revival of some sort awaits the nation of Israel before the end, Rom.

c. The model watchman: The prophets were watchman, who brought knowledge of the character of God and applied it to their contemporary situation. The prophets warned of the punishments for sins.