

Understanding Prophetic Writings

Prophets And The Nature Of Prophecy

The role and ministry of the biblical prophet was that of a 'forthteller' and a 'foreteller'. The OT prophets had more to say about the immediate future than the distant future. The prophets of God spoke to their contemporaries.

The Prophet As A Forthteller: The prophet's mission was to bring God's word to the people (Ex. 7:1), hence they often had God's word for the nation, its king and leaders. The ethical prophets reminded Israel of Yahweh's covenant, with its blessings and cursings. They preached justice, mercy and humbleness (Mic. 6:8), and stressed that obedience was more important than sacrifice (1 Sam. 15:22-23). Their oracles sometimes took the form of 'a lawsuit' (Isa. 3:13-26), 'a woe' (Hab. 2:6-8), or 'a promise' (Amos 9:11-15). Their message often took a poetic form.

The OT notes the ministry of false prophets as well as true ones (e.g. Jer. 14:4). Moses was unique as a prophet (Dt. 34:10). He had a special word about a prophet's ministry and the greater Prophet, the Messiah (Dt. 18:14-22). Prophets were often set apart to ministry by being anointed with oil (e.g. , 1 Kings 19:16).

The Prophet As A Foreteller: 'The prophet's task might involve him in foretelling such events as the deportation and captivity of God's people, their deliverance and return, their world-wide dispersion, the birth, life and death of the Messiah, his second advent and eternal kingdom' (W. Kuhrt). God shared his wisdom and knowledge through the ministry of the prophets. Many OT prophecies are fulfilled in Jesus Christ (e.g. Isa. 7:14 and Mt. 1:22, 23).

Prophecy In The New Testament: The Bible itself is a 'sure word of prophecy' (2 Pet. 1:19). We need to appreciate that the dimension of prophecy is contained in all the Bible, that is, in both Testaments, for example, 1 Corinthians 15 unpacks details relating to the return of Jesus Christ, which has yet to take place. The book of Revelation pictures events that will take place before the end of the age.

The Fulfillment Of Prophecy

The prophetic word often has a multiple reference, that is, it is meaningful and applicable in more than one instance. It would often have a near, immediate fulfillment and then one later in history. So we see concerning many prophecies that they have multiple fulfillments. Consider these examples:

The Prophecy Of The Offspring (Gen. 15:5)

'Look up at the heavens and count the stars - if indeed you can count them. So shall your offspring be.' The divine word to Abraham has its immediate and partial fulfillment in the growth of the Hebrew

nation (Ex. 32:13; Dt. 1:10, 11); the more distant and complete fulfillment is found in the universal church, the New Israel (Rom. 4:16-18; Gal. 3:6-9; 6:16).

The Prophecy Of The Sceptre (Gen. 49:10)

'The sceptre will not depart from Judah, nor the ruler's staff from between his feet, until he comes to whom it belongs and the obedience of the nations is his.' The immediate and partial fulfillment is found in the preservation of the Davidic dynasty until the time of the Exile. The more distant and complete fulfillment will be found in Jesus Christ, David's greater Son, for 'he will reign over the house of Jacob for ever, his kingdom will never end' (Lk. 1:33).

The Prophecy Given To David (2 Sam. 7:13-14)

The prophet Nathan said to king David, 'He is the one who will build a house for my Name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom for ever. I will be his father, and he shall be my son.' The immediate reference is to Solomon, but the ultimate reference is to the Lord Jesus, as the author of Hebrew indicates (Heb. 1:5). Note that 2 Sam. 7:14b does not apply to Jesus.

The Prophecies Of Mt. 24, Mk. 13 And Lk. 21

Not all the prophecies in these chapters are connected with the end times and the Lord's second advent. Some obviously apply to the events in AD 70, when the Roman armies under Titus besieged and destroyed the city of Jerusalem and its temple.

The Scope Of Prophecy

Note the following observations:

- " Prophecy may be given in the OT and fulfilled in the OT (e.g. 2 Kgs. 1-4 & 17)
- " Prophecy may be given in the OT and fulfilled in the NT (e.g. Isa. 7:14; Mt. 1:22-25)
- " Prophecy may be given in the OT and yet be unfulfilled (e.g. the millennium; Isa. 11);
- " Prophecy may be given in the NT and fulfilled in the NT (e.g. Acts 11:28)
- " Prophecy may be given in the NT and yet be unfulfilled (e.g. the Parousia; 1 Thess. 4)

Some Peculiarities Of Prophetic Language

The language of prophecy has its characteristics.

Things Yet Unfulfilled Are Spoken Of As Though They Were: Isaiah prophesied, 'The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of the shadow of death a light has dawned ... For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders' (Isa. 9:2, 6).

Although 800 years separate the prophecy and its fulfillment, it is given in the present tense. This 'prophetic present' emphasizes the certainty of the word (see Mt. 4:14- 16). The NT verse, 'And those

he predestined, he also called; those he called, he also justified; those he justified, he also glorified' (Rom. 8:30) anticipates future glory now.

Sometimes one verse or paragraph may contain two or more predicted events, which are fulfilled at different times. For example, notice how Jesus read from the scroll of Isaiah. He stopped at 'the year of the Lord's favour' (Lk. 4:17-1. 9; cf. Isa. 61:1-2).

He was obviously aware that the 'day of vengeance' was yet future. Likewise Peter, in citing Joel 2:29-31, quoted only that part of the prophecy which was fulfilled on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2:17-21). On Palm Sunday Zech. 9:9-10 was fulfilled only partially - Christ has yet to reign from Jerusalem.

Some Rules For The Interpreting Of Prophetic Scriptures

Be careful to recognize the language of prophetic scriptures, and to compare scripture with scripture when seeking to ascertain their message. Here are some guidelines:

- ✓ Research into the circumstances surrounding the prophecy.
- ✓ Take care to interpret the prophet's use of figurative language.
- ✓ Compare a prophecy with similar ones to gain insights, for example, the prophecies shared by three prophets concerning the Branch (see Isa.4:2;11:1; Jer. 23:5; 33:15; Zech. 3:8; 6:12).
- ✓ Take care to note if and how the prophecies have been fulfilled.
- ✓ Study how the Lord and the early church dealt with prophetic scriptures. The apostles saw many fulfilled in the person and ministry of Jesus Christ and his church (e.g. Joel. 2:28, 29 & Acts 2:16, 17; Amos 9:11, 12 & Acts 15:16, 17; Ex. 19:5, 6 & 1 Pet. 2:9; Hos. 2:23 & 1 Pet. 2:10; Rom. 9:25).

Different Ways In Which Prophetic Scripture Is Interpreted

The Allegorising (Or Spiritualising) Method: The way the Lord and the apostles quoted and used the OT may appear to support the view that not all prophecy is to be interpreted literally. Some extreme exponents of this opinion maintain that there are no prophecies respecting literal Israel that remain to be fulfilled. The spiritual Israel, the church, it is maintained, is now fulfilling the ancient prophecies. However, events which have concerned Israel since 1948, such as the establishment of the State of Israel and the return of Jews to their homeland, have caused many to reconsider this opinion.

The Literal Method: The word given to Ezekiel as he saw the valley of dry bones being turned into a great army was: 'This is what the Sovereign Lord says: O my people, I am going to open your graves and bring you up from them; I will bring you back to the land of Israel' (Ezek. 37:12). The fulfillment of this scripture has been a modern phenomenon.

This leads to the advice that, 'whenever possible, the prophetic Scripture, like every other part of Scripture, should be interpreted literally' (W. Kuhrt). This rule does give rise to some difficult questions, for example, are we to believe in a literal building of the Jewish temple in Jerusalem with the renewal of animal sacrifices on the basis of Ezek. 40-48? Paul's statement that in the last days the

Antichrist's throne will be in the temple adds support to such a literal interpretation (2 Thess. 2:4). However, Hebrews does indicate the end of the sacrificial system.

Schools Of Interpretation

Presuppositions quite often color individual interpretations of Scripture. Note that:

- " The rationalist school: maintains that the prophetic word came after the event.
- " The preterist school: believes that a prophecy was for the time it is given.
- " The futurist school: teaches that much has yet to be unfolded or fulfilled.
- " The historicist school: takes prophecy as being in the course of fulfillment.
- " The idealist school: spiritualizes prophecy and applies it to all history.

The Central Theme Of Prophecy

The whole inspiring motive behind prophecy is to testify to Jesus Christ and to set him at the centre of things (consider Lk. 24:27; 1 Pet. 1:10; Rev. 19: 10). Christ is the essence of the prophetic scheme of God. His sufferings and glory are two vital themes of prophecy (Acts 3:18; cf. 1 Pet. 1:10-11; Rev. 19:10). Prophecy reveals God's mystery (cf. Rom. 16:25-26; Eph. 3:4-6; Col. 1:26-27). Apart from Jesus Christ, the essential stream of prophecy concerns the Jews, the Gentiles and the church of God. It is important to appreciate that prophecy always has a practical application. The book of Revelation helped a persecuted church through a time of opposition at the end of the first century - without a doubt it will do the same in the last days on the eve of the Lord's return.