

Understanding the Prophets

Isaiah to Malachi

The writing prophets

Prophecy runs right through the Scriptures, from Genesis to Revelation. Abraham is described as a prophet (Gen 20:7). Moses is the prophet *par excellence*, the paradigm for all other prophets and the type of the ultimate, Messianic prophetic figure to come (Deut 18:18). Prophets were active during the monarchy. We later have the writing prophets. After centuries of prophetic silence, John the Baptist came on the scene in the NT. Jesus is THE prophet. Prophets are active in the early church. There is a spiritual gift of prophecy. The most extensive prophetic writing in the NT is the book of Revelation.

Deut 18:17-22 sets out the foundations of the prophetic calling and ministry:

¹⁷The Lord said to me: "What they say is good. ¹⁸I will raise up for them a prophet like you from among their fellow Israelites, and I will put my words in his mouth. He will tell them everything I command him. ¹⁹I myself will call to account anyone who does not listen to my words that the prophet speaks in my name ²⁰But a prophet who presumes to speak in my name anything I have not commanded, or a prophet who speaks in the name of other gods, is to be put to death." ²¹You may say to yourselves, "How can we know when a message has not been spoken by the Lord?" ²²If what a prophet proclaims in the name of the Lord does not take place or come true, that is a message the Lord has not spoken. That prophet has spoken presumptuously, so do not be alarmed.

In the OT, prophecy finds its fullest and most distinctive expression in the so-called writing prophets—those whose prophecies have been written down and are found in the sixteen prophetic books at the end of our OT.

The Deut 18 passage above tells us essential truths about prophets and prophecy that are applicable to the writing prophets, as well as providing the yardstick by which they are to be measured.

The challenge

The prophetic books of the OT are some of the hardest books to understand, especially when it comes to their detail.¹ The reason for this is to be found both in their nature and in their setting. The prophetic writings constitute a highly specialised form of writing (genre) and have distinctive stylistic features that the average modern reader is generally unfamiliar with. In addition, many of the prophetic books are not a single prophecy, as such, but a collection of prophecies (oracles);

¹ 'We should note at the outset that the prophetic books are among the most difficult parts of the Bible to interpret or read with understanding. The reasons for this are related to misunderstandings as to their *function* and *form*.' (Gordon D. Fee and Douglas K. Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth* (3rd ed.; Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1993), 182.)

these individual oracles have not always been ordered in a rigidly chronological manner. That increases the challenge of discerning the precise historical context and setting for the prophecy.

In order to understand and interpret prophetic writings correctly, background information is frequently required. Information that is not necessarily available within the text itself. Therefore, some familiarity is needed with the general historical setting and research may well have to be undertaken to fill in the gaps. You may well need to avail yourself of appropriate tools, such as Bible Dictionaries, Bible Handbooks etc., to ensure that you have an adequate grasp of the setting and context of the prophecy being studied. Understanding prophecy is often hard work!

The nature of prophecy

1. The prophets were *forthtellers* more than *foretellers*.

It has been estimated that, 'Less than 2 percent of Old Testament prophecy is messianic. Less than 5 percent specifically describes the new-covenant age. Less than 1 percent concerns events yet to come in our time.'²

Much of the material that we find in the OT prophetic books is concerned with the immediate events of the day, and with God's dealings with his people at that time, not with the future as such, other than the more immediate future. The prophets are God's messengers; his mouthpiece. They speak his word(s) into peoples' lives and situations. The prophets' primary role was to speak *for* God, in the first instance to their contemporaries. Each prophet is unique and presents the message in his own way, with its own style, and for his own time and context. But it is *God's* message.

So, the prophets bring God's message, whatever it may be, to God's people. This encompasses a whole range of activities:

- guidance
- warning
- rebuke
- correction
- promise
- interpretation of events (history)

They bring God's perspective on events, on life, on present circumstances and situations as well as on the whole sweep of history. Interestingly, the Jews classify books that we generally refer to as historical books (Joshua, Judges, 1-2 Samuel, 1-2 Kings) as the *Former Prophets*.

In an important sense, *all* the prophetic oracles were directed to their own day. By means of warnings and encouragements regarding the *future*, all Israel was called to *present* faithfulness. Hence, even the prophecies pointing to a seemingly distant future were not primarily given to map out that future. Quite the contrary—with references to tomorrow, the prophets were calling for repentance today and for present renewed faith in a God who actively controls history.³

2. Some prophecies are conditional.

² Gordon D. Fee and Douglas K. Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth* (3rd ed.; Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1993), 182.

³ Joel B. Green, *How to Read Prophecy*, Leicester: IVP, 1984, 59.

Certain things may or may not happen, dependent on specified contingencies. Generally, these relate to the response(s) of people, groups or even nations. See, e.g., Jer 18:7-10.

If at any time I announce that a nation or kingdom is to be uprooted, torn down and destroyed,⁸ and if that nation I warned repents of its evil, then I will relent and not inflict on it the disaster I had planned.⁹ And if at another time I announce that a nation or kingdom is to be built up and planted,¹⁰ and if it does evil in my sight and does not obey me, then I will reconsider the good I had intended to do for it.

Not every prophecy, therefore, was, or necessarily will be, fulfilled in a woodenly literal way. The sovereignty of God comes into play here. He may do as he wills and things may change as a result of God responding to human response to him.

As Joel Green writes, 'Predictive prophecy is by nature conditional.'⁴ He adds, 'To call for an eventual literal fulfilment of every unfulfilled word is to misunderstand the nature of prophecy and the character of God.'⁵ Green emphasises the fact that the response of those to whom the prophecy was directed impacted on the ultimate outcome: the way in which the prophecy played itself out in literal fulfilment or otherwise. Jonah and Nineveh is a classic example.

3. In handling passages that involve *foretelling*, extra care is needed.

It is important to identify the various layers:

- The prophet's own time
- The immediate future
- The more distant future
- The ultimate future

Near view/far view. Prophets will switch between these different views and it can be difficult to discern which view is in view.

To what is the prophet/prophecy referring? Some prophecies are multi-layered, having different levels of fulfilment. Once we move beyond the immediate future, beyond the period of the OT, we need to let the NT be our guide. OT prophecy should be interpreted in the light of the NT.

We need to read and interpret the prophets against the backdrop of the big picture (story) of God's plan. The kingdom of God is a central concept. The reign, rule of God which has come and is present, but is also still to come, and in that regard is future. *Already but not yet.*⁶

The primary temporal prophetic distinction is between the present age and the age to come (the last days).

The Day of Yahweh. The OT prophets frequently speak of the time of God's dramatic intervention into human history as the "Day of Yahweh" (e.g., Is 13:6, 9; 30:3; Ezek 30:3; Joel 2:31; 3:14; Obad 15; Zeph 1:7-18) (see Day of the Lord). They use this term when describing both God's judgment and his deliverance. Likewise, in the prophetic literature the "Day of Yahweh" can refer to "near view" (i.e., imminent) events such as the Babylonian invasion, as well as future ("far view") events such as the restoration and regathering of Israel. Numerous other similar terms such as "the day" or "that day"

⁴ Joel B. Green, *How to Read Prophecy*, Leicester: IVP, 1984, 102.

⁵ Joel B. Green, *How to Read Prophecy*, Leicester: IVP, 1984, 102.

⁶ See further on this chh. 9-10 of Joel B. Green, *How to Read Prophecy*, Leicester: IVP, 1984.

are also used by the prophets in the same sense (e.g., Is 2:2, 11, 17; 4:2; 12:1; 34:8; Ezek 30:2–3; Hos 2:16–21; Joel 1:15; Amos 9:11; Zeph 1:9–10, 15).

The NT writers use this term (“day of the Lord”) often to refer to the second coming of Christ. Likewise, they use similar terms such as “that day,” “those days,” and “the day of our Lord Jesus” as synonyms for “the day of the Lord.”

J. D. Hays, ‘Prophecy and Eschatology In Christian Theology,’ in Mark J. Boda and Gordon J. McConville (eds.), *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Prophets*, Nottingham: IVP, 2012, 604.

How should we approach prophetic books?

1. Understand the message for its time. Put it into its context.

The messages of the OT prophets are not primarily predictions for our day, contrary to how they are popularly conceived. They were written, as all Scripture was, in the first instance, for others. These prophetic oracles accordingly had meaning for their original audience. It is principally through grasping that meaning, even where, under the inspiration of the Spirit of God, there is additional meaning (including future prediction), that we will come to understand what these books have to say to us today. We have to read the text on its own terms,⁷ focusing on what the author wanted to communicate: the author’s intended meaning.

We therefore must give serious attention to:

a) the historical setting (as far as it can be deduced)

- the author
- the date
- the recipients
- the historical context (Israel/Judah; other nations; significant events)

Prophets writing against the backdrop of Israel’s rejection of God, and rebellion against him, inevitably focus more on the curses. This is true of the majority of pre-exilic prophecy. Exilic and post-exilic prophets, looking beyond God’s judgment, are filled more with blessings.

b) the cultural setting

- religious context
- social context
- customs/practices

c) the literary setting

- i. the book as a whole: its message and main themes
- ii. genre
 - ⇒ The primary literary form (genre) is the prophetic oracle
 - ⇒ Oracles are often introduced by the formula ‘Thus says the Lord [Yahweh]’
 - ⇒ Oracles fall into two main categories: woe (judgment) and salvation
- iii. literary forms
 - lawsuit
 - woe
 - oracles against nations
 - promise

⁷ Joel Green highlights a number of problems that we bring, as modern readers, to the prophetic Scriptures. First on his list is the **failure to read the text on its own terms.** (Joel B. Green, *How to Read Prophecy*, Leicester: IVP, 1984, 25.

- enactment (acted prophecy)
 - messenger speech
- iv. style
- ⇒ Often emotional, raw, intense⁸
 - ⇒ A good deal of OT prophetic writing is poetic
 - ⇒ NB the function of poetry as an aide-memoire (like song lyrics)

Features of Hebrew poetry:

- synonymous parallelism
 - antithetical parallelism
 - synthetic parallelism
- v. language
- figurative language
 - met aphor
 - allegory
 - proverb
 - lamentation
 - symbolism
 - apocalyptic

2. Discern the core principles involved

What did the message mean, as given by the prophet to his original audience in their setting?

This will *always* be the the foundation for establishing what it means today.

For passages which have a future element (ones that are predictive: foretelling) we must be aware of the issue of literal versus non-literal (figurative, symbolic, spiritual) fulfilment. How was the prophecy fulfilled, or how might it be fulfilled?

3. Apply the message for today

The principle of analogy allows us to move from the prophet's world and that of his audience to our own. Having identified the essential message we can consider how that relates to the modern reader. What does it mean for people today, in their own world and context?

Note the concept of *sensus plenior* (fuller meaning). This is always grounded in NT usage of OT prophetic texts.

⁸ 'The style of their writing attests to the passionate involvement of these messengers. It is often raw with emotion: in Jeremiah's painfully honest cries (8:18–9:1); in Ezekiel's shocking statements (20:21–26); in Isaiah's lyrical rhapsodies (40:12–31); in Habakkuk's incredulous questioning (1:12–17); in Amos' sarcasm and irony (3:12). The prophets were often so personally involved with their message that their lives as well as their words conveyed it.' (S. Dempster, 'Prophetic Books,' in T. Desmond Alexander and Brian S. Rosner (eds.), *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, Leicester: IVP, 2000, 123.)

In approaching and interpreting OT prophecy we need to be cautious.
Humility is called for.
A lack of dogmatism is essential.

In unfolding the major themes we can be confident.
In unravelling the details we need to be circumspect.

The power of preaching and teaching from the prophets hardly can be appreciated if one has done little or no examination of these texts. The sheer bulk of the words of the prophets is almost equal to the whole New Testament. But besides the extensive space they occupy in the revelation of God, they carry an extraordinary amount of clout with regard to both the threatened judgment of God and his promised redemption and deliverances, both in the present and the future.⁹

For Further Reading

Gordon D. Fee and Douglas K. Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth*, 3rd ed., Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1993, chapter 10, 'The Prophets: Enforcing the Covenant in Israel.'

Joel B. Green, *How to Read Prophecy*, Leicester: IVP, 1984.

Walter C. Kaiser Jr., *Preaching and Teaching from the Old Testament: A Guide for the Church*, Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003, chapter 7, 'Preaching and Teaching the Prophets of the Old Testament.'

William W. Klein, Craig Blomberg, and Robert L. Hubbard, *Introduction to Biblical Interpretation*, Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2004.

Gordon McConville, *Exploring the Old Testament: The Prophets*, Vol. 4, London: SPCK, 2002.

For help in understanding and applying individual prophetic books, or passages within them, see:
NIV Application Commentaries
Bible Speaks Today (OT)

⁹ Walter C. Kaiser Jr., *Preaching and Teaching from the Old Testament: A Guide for the Church*, Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003, 118–119.