

Principles of Bible Prophecy

By Wayne Jackson

An examination of the lexical literature reveals that scholars are undecided as to the etymology of the term “prophet.” Some think that the noun is from an Arabic term meaning “spokesman” (Smith 1928, 10), whereas others have contended that the root is a Hebrew form which signifies a “bubbling up,” as when water issues from a hidden fountain (Girdlestone n.d., 239). This would suggest the idea of the inspiration behind the prophet. It is now more commonly believed, however, that the word may be of Akkadian origin and that it may denote “to be called” (Unger and White 1980, 310).

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Perhaps the best way to determine the meaning of the term is to examine the manner in which the Bible employs it. The classic passage which sets forth the role of the prophet is Exodus 7:1,2.

And Jehovah said unto Moses, See, I have made thee as God to Pharaoh; and Aaron thy brother shall be thy prophet. Thou shalt speak all that I command thee; and Aaron thy brother shall speak unto Pharaoh.

A prophet was simply a spokesman for God. The prophet was also called a “seer.” Note how the terms “prophet” and “seer” are interchanged in 1 Samuel 9:9:

Beforetime in Israel, when a man went to inquire of God, thus he said, Come, and let us go to the seer; for he that is now called a Prophet was beforetime called a Seer.

Some scholars suggest that the term “prophet” stressed the objective or active work of God’s spokesman, whereas “seer” underscored the subjective method of receiving divine revelation, i.e., by “seeing” (Freeman 1968, 40). A prophet was also designated as a “man of God” (2 Kings 4:9), a “servant of the Lord” (Ezekiel 38:17), and a “messenger of Jehovah” (Malachi 3:1).

There are a number of truths which need to be appreciated if one is to understand the function of prophecy in biblical literature. Let us consider the following points.

The Panorama of Prophecy

In discussing prophecy, one needs to make a clear distinction between “foretelling” and “forthtelling.” Many assume, and erroneously so, that all prophecy is foretelling, i.e., predictive in its nature. However, prophecy also concerns the revelation of events which occurred in the past; it may deal with present circumstances (i.e., contemporary with the prophet), or it can look forward to the future.

For example, Moses was a prophet (Deuteronomy 18:15), yet when he recorded the creation activity of Genesis 1, he was giving a divinely inspired account of what transpired during the first week of earth's history. Certainly he was not present to witness those events. His prophetic testimony thus looked into the past. On the other hand, when the prophet addressed certain situations during Israel's forty-year sojourn in the wilderness, he was dealing with current conditions in the lives of his fellow Hebrews. Amos was a prophet who wrote many things that "he saw concerning Israel" (Amos 1:1).

Finally, the prophet's vision was sometimes directed into the future where he foretold details regarding certain people and events. In passing, we might simply mention several categories relating to predictive prophecy. For instance, there are prophecies that relate to individuals. The mission of Josiah was foretold more than three centuries before his birth (cf. 1 Kings 13; 2 Kings 23). The role of the Persian king, Cyrus, in releasing the Hebrews from Babylonian captivity, was described more than a century and a half before his reign (cf. Isaiah 44:28; 45:1ff). The fate of cities and nations is prophetically announced in various Scriptures. Daniel's descriptions of the Babylonian, Medo-Persian, Greek, and Roman empires are nothing short of miraculous (cf. Daniel 2,7,8). Too, there is the matter of messianic prophecy. Of the more than eight hundred prophecies in the old Testament, at least three hundred center on the coming Christ (cf. Jackson 1974, 66-69).

The design of predictive prophecy was to establish the credibility of God and, ultimately, the authenticity of his sacred Scriptures. In this article, we will be dealing principally with the predictive nature of biblical prophecy.

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Genuine Predictive Prophecy—the Test

Predictive prophecy may be defined as

a miracle of knowledge, a declaration, or description, or representation of something future, beyond the power of human sagacity to discern or to calculate, and it is the highest evidence that can be given of supernatural communion with Deity, and of the truth of a revelation from God (Horne 1841, 119).

There are a number of criteria for determining the genuineness of prophecy—as opposed to speculative prediction.

Genuine prophecy involves **proper timing**. The oracle must significantly precede the person or event described. It must be beyond the realm of reasonable calculation so as to preclude the possibility of an "educated guess." When one "prophesies" that it will rain tomorrow—with a weather front moving in—it hardly evidences divine intervention.

The prophecy must deal in **specific details**, not vague generalities which are capable of being manipulated to fit various circumstances. To predict that “someone” will do “something” at “sometime” is not terribly impressive.

Exact fulfillment, not merely a high degree of probability, must characterize the prediction. A prophet who is eighty percent accurate is no prophet at all!

In this connection we may observe that the prophets of the Bible, when uttering their declarations, spoke with absolute confidence. They frequently employed a verbal form known as the perfect state, which suggests completed action. One scholar calls it the “perfect of confidence” (Watts 1951, 17). It speaks of the event as if it had already occurred (though still in the future), thus stressing the certainty of its fulfillment. Isaiah could therefore say, “For unto us a child is born” (9:6), even though the incarnation of Christ was still several centuries away. Prophecy was never couched with an uncertain “maybe,” or an ambiguous “perhaps.”

The divine standard for a true prophet is stated by Moses.

When a prophet speaketh in the name of Jehovah, if the thing follow not, nor come to pass, that is the thing which Jehovah hath not spoken (Deuteronomy 18:22).

In Isaiah 41:23, a challenge is issued to the false gods of paganism: “Declare the things that are to come hereafter, that we may know that ye are gods” Clearly, predictive prophecy is a very important element of the sacred Scriptures, and stands in bold relief to the counterfeit prophecies of today’s world.

Prophecy—Conditional or Absolute?

While we have noted that the prophets spoke with confidence, it is also important to observe that some prophecies were obviously conditional. This is especially true with reference to predictions that contained warnings of impending judgment upon wicked peoples. The doom prophetically announced was dependent upon whether or not that nation would turn from its evil. For example, when Jonah went to the city of Nineveh, he announced: “Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown” (3:4). However, that warning was obviously conditional as evidenced by the fact that when the people of Nineveh repented, and “God saw their works that they turned from their evil way,” he withdrew the judgment and did not destroy them (cf. 3:10). Similarly, when God promised the Israelites that the land of Canaan would be their inheritance, that pledge was contingent upon their fidelity to Jehovah. Note the testimony of Joshua 23:16:

When ye transgress the covenant of Jehovah your God, which he commanded you, and go and serve other gods, and bow down yourselves to them; then will the anger of Jehovah be kindled against you, and ye shall perish quickly from off the good land which he hath given unto you.

The Hebrew nation did apostatize and lost its special privileges with God (cf. Matthew 21:43). Those religionists and politicians today who argue for Israel's intrinsic right to Palestinian territory overlook this very critical element of Bible prophecy.

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On the other hand, some prophecies were absolute. Predictions concerning the coming Messiah were not predicated upon human response; they were fulfilled with amazing accuracy. The Messiah was to be: the seed of woman (Genesis 3:15), the offspring of Abraham (Genesis 22:18), from the tribe of Judah (Genesis 49:10), born to a virgin (Isaiah 7:14), in the town of Bethlehem (Micah 5:2), etc. There was nothing conditional about these statements.

The Language of Prophecy

If one is to accurately interpret Bible prophecy, he must surely recognize that language of predictive literature can be either literal or figurative. But how does one determine the nature of prophetic terminology? In some instances common sense will dictate the character of the prophecy. If a literal view implies an impossibility or an absurdity, it is obviously figurative. The context will frequently shed light on the situation. In many instances, the issue will be settled by how the New Testament writers (who quote or cite the prophecies) viewed the matter. When Old Testament writers declared that Christ would be the offspring of Abraham (Genesis 22:18), or that he would be raised from the dead (Psalm 16:10), they made straightforward predictions that were fulfilled literally.

However, when Isaiah announced that John the Baptizer would "make level in the desert a highway for our God" (40:3), he was not suggesting that John would engineer a freeway project in the Palestinian wilderness; rather, the language was a symbolic description of John's preparatory work preliminary to the ministry of Jesus (cf. Matthew 3:1ff). When the prophet foretold that "the lion shall eat straw like an ox" (Isaiah 11:7), he was not suggesting that Jehovah intended to redesign the dental/digestive processes of the animal kingdom in the alleged "millennial" age. He was figuratively suggesting the peaceful atmosphere that would be characteristic of the church of Christ as the various nations flowed into it (cf. Isaiah 11:10; Romans 15:12). Thus, it is vital that the nature of the language in biblical prophecy be correctly identified.

The Prophet and His Generation

Liberal critics of the Bible deny the reality of predictive prophecy (as well as other miraculous elements in the Scriptures). Frequently they ask: "What relevance would the prophecy have had to an antique generation which would never see it fulfilled?" It is for this reason that they desperately seek some application which would be contemporary with the prophet himself (as, for example, postulating a young maiden of Isaiah's day who would conform to his virgin-birth prophecy—7:14). The fact is, some prophecies had no immediate relevance to their contemporary generation. Those ancients would not

fully understand the predictions—except dimly through the eye of faith. Abraham, through prophecy, was promised that his seed would receive Canaan for an inheritance, though he himself never saw the fulfillment (cf. Genesis 15:12ff; Hebrews 11:8-16).

Not even the prophets understood the meaning of many of their inspired utterances. Peter discusses this very matter in 1 Peter 1:10-12. God's redemptive plan, as previewed by the Old Testament messengers, was a "mystery," which can now be perceived only by means of New Testament revelation (Ephesians 3:1-13).

Partial and Complete Fulfillment

Those with loose theological leanings are sometimes prone to say that certain prophecies of the Old Testament had a rather immediate fulfillment, but that the New Testament writers sometimes lift these passages from their original contexts and give them meanings foreign to their original design. One writer, for example, has asserted

Paul paraphrased passages without regard to their original context, or meaning. . . It is as though the words of scripture convey a convincing power within themselves apart from their original context (Batey 1969, 134). Unfortunately, Coffman agrees with such a statement (1983, 143). There is an old saying: "A text out of context is a mere pretext." Why charge the apostles with that which we do not tolerate in contemporary preachers?

In the first place, whenever possible, one should attempt to ascertain precisely how the New Testament writer is appealing to the Old Testament passage. But that is not always easy. Is the New Testament writer merely borrowing language from an Old Testament text? Is he employing an ancient Scripture illustratively? Or does he mean to affirm that a New Testament incident is actually a "fulfillment" of prophecy? We must remember that ancient writers did not use the same literary devices employed today. Quotation marks, colons, ellipsis marks, brackets, etc., were unknown to them. In view of this, we may not always know just how they were utilizing the language of the former Scriptures. Since we are largely ignorant of their procedures, criticism of them is scarcely appropriate (cf. Pache 1969, Chapter 10).

Second, is it not possible that the omniscient Holy Spirit, who guided both the Old Testament prophets and the New Testament inspired writers, could have directed certain prophecies to ancient Israel, but also could have known that a future event would ultimately fulfill the meaning of his words? What is wrong with such a view? Absolutely nothing. It surely is possible and preserves the integrity of the New Testament writers. Let me suggest an example to illustrate this point.

David declared: "Yea, mine own familiar friend, in whom I trusted, who did eat of my bread, hath lifted up his heel against me" (Psalm 41:9). During the last supper, Christ quoted from this passage as follows: "He that eateth my bread lifted up his heel against me" (John 13:18), applying it to the treachery of Judas, and declaring that such fulfilled the statement in David's psalm. The Lord, however, altered the quotation. He omitted, "whom I trusted," from the original source, the reason being, he never trusted Judas!

Jesus knew from the beginning who would betray him (John 6:64). It is clear, therefore, that Psalm 41:9 had an immediate application to one of David's enemies, but the remote and complete "fulfillment" came in Judas' betrayal of the Son of God. I personally do not believe that it is acceptable to suggest that prophecies have a "double fulfillment." That is a meaningless expression. If a prophecy is filled full once, it can hardly be filled "fuller" later! It would be far better to speak of some texts which have an "immediate application" or "partial fulfillment," and then a more "remote fulfillment."

Still again, we may note that, consistent with his own purposes, the Holy Spirit may give a prophecy multiple applications. Consider the case of Psalm 2:7, where Jehovah said: "Thou art my son; this day have I begotten thee." In the New Testament, this statement is applied to Christ in several different senses. First, it is employed to demonstrate that Christ is superior to the angels, for the Father never addressed any angelic being, saying, "You are my son, this day have I begotten thee" (cf. Hebrews 1:5). [This is a truth which the "Jehovah's Witnesses" (who claim that Christ was a created angel) would do well to learn.] Second, Psalm 2:7 is applied by Paul to Christ's resurrection from the dead. The apostle argues that "God hath fulfilled the same unto our children, in that he raised up Jesus; as also it is written in the second psalm, Thou art my son. . . ." (Acts 13:33). It was, of course, by his resurrection that Jesus was declared to be the Son of God with power (Romans 1:4). Thus, it was appropriate that the psalm be applied to the Lord's resurrection. Third, the writer of Hebrews uses the psalm to prove that Christ glorified not himself to be made our high priest; rather, such a role was due to his relationship as the Son of God (5:5). Again, we absolutely must stress that the Holy Spirit, who inspired the original psalm, surely had all of these various thoughts in mind as is evidenced by his guidance of the New Testament writers as they employed his language.

Typological Prophecy

The Old Testament contains numerous examples of a device called a "type." A type may be defined as "[a] figure or ensample of something future and more or less prophetic, called the 'Antitype'" (Bullinger 1968, 768). A simpler description of a type might be "a pictorial prophecy." For example, Melchizedek, who was both king of Salem and a priest of God, prophetically symbolized the Son of God who rules as our King and serves as our High Priest (cf. Psalm 110:4; Hebrews 5:5-10; 6:20; 7:1-17). Jonah's three-day confinement in the belly of the great fish was a pictorial prediction of Christ's three-day entombment (cf. Matthew 12:40), and his resurrection from the dead. Typology is an important form of prophecy.

The foregoing principles by no means exhaust the topic of Bible prophecy. They are, however, illustrative of the kinds of factors that need to be considered in pursuing this sort of study. Again, let us remind ourselves that prophecy is one of the crucial proofs for establishing the credibility of the Holy Scriptures. Let us therefore study this area of biblical information carefully and employ it properly in our defense of the faith.

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