

In search of...



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Understanding Prophecy

Prophecy is an important part of the message of God as understood in the Scriptures. Unfortunately, the nature of prophecy is often quite misunderstood. Many think that prophecy always involves things that will happen in the future. When the word "prophecy" is mentioned, many start thinking maybe of Elijah or Isaiah, perhaps the Revelation to John, or even people like Nostradamus or Edgar Cayce. What, then, is prophecy? Who spoke them? What were the messages spoken through prophecy?

Prophecy, in its basic

meaning, involves "a foretelling, prediction, a declaration of something to come," according to Webster's dictionary. In the Bible, however, prophecy is the message of God through the Holy Spirit as communicated by a prophet or some other person whom God chose (II Peter 1:20-21; Jeremiah 2; Hosea 4; etc.). That message, many times, does involve the future, either in terms of future consequences that will arise on account of the sin of the people, or the future promise that God has in store through Christ and His Kingdom (cf. Isaiah 7; Jeremiah 31-34; Isaiah 2, 53; etc.). Yet the message can just as

easily involve current events and condemnation of present sinfulness (Isaiah 1-3; Jeremiah 2; etc.). Prophecy, therefore, does not always involve the future!

The Bible demonstrates that God normally speaks through prophets. There are examples of others who prophesy by God's power (e.g. Eldad and Medad, Numbers 11:26-27; Saul, I Samuel 10:10-11; Caiaphas, John 11:50-51), but, in general, the prophetic message was spoken through men whom God chose. Many such men were called directly by God (Elisha, I Kings 19:16-21; Jeremiah, Jeremiah 1, etc.), although there does seem to be a class of prophets, at least during the days of Elijah and Elisha ("the sons of the prophets;" cf. II Kings 2:15; 6:1-2). These men were called from all sorts of backgrounds, everything from shepherds (Amos, Amos 1:1) to priests (Jeremiah, Jeremiah 1:1). All that was required of them was to present the message of God through the Holy Spirit to the people. They were not involved in the interpretive process--their messages were directly from God, and were not of their own invention (II Peter 1:20-21). This set them apart from the false prophets who dared to speak as if God spoke to them, yet, in reality, they were speaking from their own imaginations (cf. Hananiah; Jeremiah 28).

God would communicate through these prophets in different ways. Many times they were to stand and present a direct message to the people or to the king (cf. Isaiah 7; Jeremiah 7). Sometimes God would communicate through

them with signs: God would use an example for instruction (the potter and clay, Jeremiah 17), events in the lives of the prophets for instruction (Isaiah and Maher-shalal-hash-baz, Isaiah 8; Hosea and Gomer, Hosea 1-4), or command the prophets to act in certain ways for instructive purposes (Isaiah 20; Ezekiel 4:4-17). To others God would provide visions (Daniel, Daniel 7-9; John, Revelation).

In the Old Testament, the message of the prophets was rather consistent, as Zechariah indicates in Zechariah 1:4:

"Be ye not as your fathers, unto whom the former prophets cried, saying, 'Thus saith the LORD of hosts, 'Return ye now from your evil ways, and from your evil doings:'" but they did not hear, nor hearken unto me, saith the LORD."

All the prophets from Moses to Zechariah warned the people to cease from sin and follow God according to the Law. Many of the prophets would go on to inform Israel of the consequences of their continued sin. This usually involved the prediction of great destruction and devastation, both from natural forces like pestilence and famine and from invading armies of men. The defeat and exile of Israel at the hands of the Assyrians and the defeat and exile of Judah at the hands of the Babylonians validated all of these warnings of the prophets (cf. II Kings 17, 25).

While the main audience of the Old Testament prophets was Israel, many times prophets would prophesy regarding the upcoming condemnation of other nations around Israel (cf. Isaiah 13-20; Jeremiah 46-51; etc.). The messages of Jonah, Nahum,

and Obadiah entirely focus on the fate of other nations. All such messages, however, are designed to glorify the name of the LORD and demonstrate His power over not only Israel but also all the nations.

Many of the Old Testament prophets also did speak of the glory that God would bring back to His people after His judgments. These prophecies involved the upcoming Messiah and the Kingdom that would be established. These are the classic predictive, or Messianic, prophecies concerning which many are familiar. Some include Isaiah 2:1-4; 9:1-6; 53; Jeremiah 31-33; Ezekiel 41-48; Daniel 7-9, and a host of others.

While prophecy ceased from Israel between Malachi and the days of Jesus' birth (ca. 420 BCE - 4 BCE), the New Testament also features many prophets. These prophets were believers given the gift of prophecy by God (cf. 1 Corinthians 12:10). Some such prophecies involve messages regarding future events, including Agabus' messages, along with God's revelation to John (cf. Acts 11:28; 21:10-12; Revelation). Much of the work of the New Testament prophets, however, involved encouraging the brethren (Acts 15:32; 1 Corinthians 14). In the days before the written New Testament, the prophets played the vital role of communicating God's message to the believers, strengthening them in their faith and exhorting them to follow God's purposes for their lives.

Prophecy, therefore, certainly involves the prediction of future events, but fundamentally involves the message of God delivered to man. If we will properly understand God's prophetic word, we must understand to

whom the prophecy was first spoken, whether it involves only the immediate audience or also people in the future, and the referent of predictive prophecies. If our interpretation of a prophecy makes no sense in light of the original audience of the message, that is a clear warning that our interpretation may not be accurate. If we take heed to this, we will do better at escaping the "tyranny of the present," presuming that all prophecy actually involves our own day. God spoke the word through the prophets to encourage His people to do the right thing and to comfort them, establishing what would come to pass to show them that He indeed was the One True God, the Creator, and Lord. This is as true for the New Testament audience as much as the Old Testament one!

The gift of prophecy, of God specifically inspiring an individual to provide a message, passed away at the end of the first century (1 Corinthians 13:8-10). Nevertheless, there is a role even today for those who would speak in the prophetic tradition. Christians need to be told to repent of sin just as Israel did (1 Corinthians 10:1-12). America many times acts in similar ways to Babylon and Rome of old (cf. Isaiah 13-14, Jeremiah 50-51, Revelation 17-18). Let us properly understand prophecy and promote God's truth!

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Ruler by Night

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- A man of the Pharisees came to Jesus by night (John 3:1)
- His name was Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews (vs. 1)
- “...these signs that you do unless God is with him” (vs. 2)
- “...I say to you, unless one is born again...” (vs. 3)
- “...he cannot see the kingdom of God (vs. 3)
- “Can he enter a second time into his mother’s womb...?” (vs. 4)
- “unless one is born of water and the Spirit...” (vs. 5)
- “That which is born of the flesh is flesh...” (vs. 6)
- “Do not marvel that I said to you, You must be born again.” (vs. 7)
- “Are you the teacher of Israel and yet...” (vs. 10)
- “...so must the Son of Man be lifted up,” (vs. 14)
- “that whoever believes in Him may have eternal life.” (vs. 15)