

INTRODUCTION TO PROPHECY

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I. General Concepts

A. Prophecy is a revelation of God delivered in written or spoken words by a human being acting under the inspiration or control of the Holy Spirit. This definition is implied in the statement by Micaiah son of Imla when he responded to the suggestion of the king's messenger to agree with the unanimously favorable answer of the king's prophets: "As sure as the LORD lives, I can tell him only what the LORD tells me" (1 Kgs 22:14; cf. 2 Chron 18:13). As Peter says in 2 Pet. 1:20-21: "Above all, you must understand that no prophecy of Scripture came about by the prophet's own interpretation. For prophecy never had its origin in the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit."

B. This is not to deny that God sometimes delivered a message through the symbolic actions of his prophets. In Ezekiel 12, for example, Ezekiel acts out the exile that was coming upon the people of Judah. It is only to point out that prophecy in its strictest sense involved verbal communication.

C. The prophet's role as God's spokesman is indicated clearly in Ex. 6:28 - 7:2. You will recall that when the Lord instructed Moses to tell Pharaoh everything that the Lord told Moses to say, Moses claimed that his faltering speech would hinder Pharaoh from listening to him. The Lord then said to Moses, "See, I have made you like God to Pharaoh, and your brother Aaron will be your prophet. You are to say everything I command you, and your brother Aaron is to tell Pharaoh to let the Israelites go out of his country." Aaron was Moses' prophet in the sense that he delivered to Pharaoh the words of Moses.

D. Moses is called a prophet because God spoke through him (see, e.g., Num. 12:1-8), and in Deut. 18:14-20, God, speaking through Moses, makes clear that a prophet is his spokesman. That text reads (NIV):

14 The nations you will dispossess listen to those who practice sorcery or divination. But as for you, the LORD your God has not permitted you to do so. 15 The LORD your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among your own brothers. You must listen to him. 16 For this is what you asked of the LORD your God at Horeb on the day of the assembly when you said, "Let us not hear the voice of the LORD our God nor see this great fire anymore, or we will die."

17 The LORD said to me: "What they say is good. 18 I will raise up for them a prophet like you from among their brothers; I will put my words in his mouth, and he will tell them everything I command him. 19 If anyone does not listen to my words that the prophet speaks in my name,

I myself will call him to account. 20 But a prophet who presumes to speak in my name anything I have not commanded him to say, or a prophet who speaks in the name of other gods, must be put to death."

E. The Spirit's role in prophetic inspiration is apparent in both the O.T. and N.T.

1. O.T. -- In 2 Chron. 15:1, 20:14, and 24:20 it is said that the Spirit came upon the prophets at the time they prophesied. Ezekiel reported in Ezek. 2:2 that the Spirit entered him when God spoke to him. Micah declared to Israel its rebellious acts because he was filled with the Spirit of the Lord (Micah 3:8). Zechariah condemned the people for rejecting the word that the Lord had revealed to them through the former prophets by his Spirit (Zech. 7:12). In 1 Sam. 10:10, Saul prophesies when the Spirit of the Lord comes on him in power. In 2 Sam. 23:2, David declared that the Spirit of the Lord spoke through him. In Hos. 9:7 the prophet is called the man of the Spirit.

2. N.T. -- Prophecy is one of the gifts of the Spirit (1 Cor. 12:8-10). In Acts 11:28 the prophet Agabus predicted "through the Spirit" that a severe famine would spread over the Roman world, and in Acts 21:10 the Holy Spirit spoke through him in predicting Paul's upcoming treatment.

II. Some Titles of the Hebrew Prophets

A. Being spokesmen for God, it is not surprising that prophets are said to be God's servants (1 Ki. 14:18; 2 Ki. 9:7, 17:13, 17:23, 21:10, 24:2; Jer. 7:25, 29:19, Zec. 1:6) and sometimes are given the title "man of God" (e.g., 2 Chron. 30:16 [Moses]; Ezra 3:2 [Moses]; 1 Sam. 2:27 [unidentified], 9:6-10 [Samuel]; 1 Ki. 12:22 [Shemaiah]; 1 Ki. 13:1-3 [unidentified]; 1 Ki. 17:18, 24 [Elijah]; 2 Ki. 5:8, 7:17-18 [Elisha]; 2 Chron. 25:7-9 [unidentified]).

B. Prophets also are called "seers" (e.g., 1 Sam. 9:11 [Samuel]; 2 Sam. 24:11 [Gad]; 2 Chron. 33:18 [unidentified]; Amos 7:12). This was especially true early in Israel's history (1 Sam. 9:9). They are "seers" in the sense they were given by God insight into past, present, or future events.

C. The main term used in the O.T. to refer to a prophet is the Hebrew word *nabi'*, which is translated "prophet." The origin of this word is much debated, but the essential idea in it appears to be that of authorized spokesman. (*Theological Wordbook of the O.T.*, 2:544) It was translated *profthts* in Greek, which has the basic meaning of one who speaks forth in behalf of another. That Greek word, of course, is the source of our English word prophet.

III. Call of the Hebrew Prophets

A. Some people were used by God to speak on his behalf on rare occasions, but others were called to be prophets throughout their lifetimes.

B. Those called to a prolonged prophetic ministry sometimes had a very moving initial "call experience." These staggering divine encounters were pivotal points in the lives of these prophets.

1. Jeremiah's call is recounted in Jer. 1:4-10. It states (NIV):

The word of the LORD came to me, saying, 5 "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, before you were born I set you apart; I appointed you as a prophet to the nations." 6 "Ah, Sovereign LORD," I said, "I do not know how to speak; I am only a child." 7 But the LORD said to me, "Do not say, 'I am only a child.' You must go to everyone I send you to and say whatever I command you. 8 Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you and will rescue you," declares the LORD. 9 Then the LORD reached out his hand and touched my mouth and said to me, "Now, I have put my words in your mouth. 10 See, today I appoint you over nations and kingdoms to uproot and tear down, to destroy and overthrow, to build and to plant."

2. Ezekiel's call is recounted in Ezek. 1:1 - 3:15. He is among the exiles in Babylon and is given this awesome vision of God riding a supernatural chariot being maneuvered at his will by cherubim. Ezekiel falls face down and hears the voice of God. Ezek. 2:1-7 states (NIV):

He said to me, "Son of man, stand up on your feet and I will speak to you." 2 As he spoke, the Spirit came into me and raised me to my feet, and I heard him speaking to me. 3 He said: "Son of man, I am sending you to the Israelites, to a rebellious nation that has rebelled against me; they and their fathers have been in revolt against me to this very day. 4 The people to whom I am sending you are obstinate and stubborn. Say to them, 'This is what the Sovereign LORD says.' 5 And whether they listen or fail to listen--for they are a rebellious house--they will know that a prophet has been among them. 6 And you, son of man, do not be afraid of them or their words. Do not be afraid, though briars and thorns are all around you and you live among scorpions. Do not be afraid of what they say or terrified by them, though they are a rebellious house. 7 You must speak my words to them, whether they listen or fail to listen, for they are rebellious. 8 But you, son of man, listen to what I say to you. Do not rebel like that rebellious house; open your mouth and eat what I give you."

Ezekiel is then given a scroll that had written on both sides words of lament, mourning, and woe, and he is told to eat it. He does that and then is told to go to Israel to speak God's words to them. God then transports him miraculously to the exiles to whom he is to prophesy. It's no wonder to read in Ezek. 3:15: "I came to the exiles who lived at Tel Abib near the Kebar River. And there, where they were living, I sat among them for seven days--overwhelmed."

3. Isaiah's call is given in Isaiah 6:

In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord seated on a throne, high and exalted, and the train of his robe filled the temple. 2 Above him were seraphs, each with six wings: With two wings they covered their faces, with two they covered their feet, and with two they were flying. 3 And they were calling to one another: "Holy, holy, holy is the LORD Almighty; the whole earth is full of his glory." 4 At the sound of their voices the doorposts and thresholds shook and the temple was filled with smoke. 5 "Woe to me!" I cried. "I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the LORD Almighty." 6 Then one of the seraphs flew to me with a live coal in his hand, which he had taken with tongs from the altar. 7 With it he touched my mouth and said, "See, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away and your sin atoned for." 8 Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, "Whom shall I send? And who will go for us?" And I said, "Here am I. Send me!" 9 He said, "Go and tell this people: "Be ever hearing, but never understanding; be ever seeing, but never perceiving." 10 Make the heart of this people calloused; make their ears dull and close their eyes. Otherwise they might see with their eyes, hear with their ears, understand with their hearts, and turn and be healed." 11 Then I said, "For how long, O Lord?" And he answered: "Until the cities lie ruined and without inhabitant, until the houses are left deserted and the fields ruined and ravaged, 12 until the LORD has sent everyone far away and the land is utterly forsaken. 13 And though a tenth remains in the land, it will again be laid waste. But as the terebinth and oak leave stumps when they are cut down, so the holy seed will be the stump in the land."

IV. Some General Themes of the Hebrew Prophets (from Archer, *A Survey of O.T. Introduction*, 331-332)

A. The prophets encouraged God's people to trust in Yahweh's mercy and redemptive power, rather than in their own merits or strength or in the might of their human allies. For example, Isa. 31:1 states: "Woe to those who go down to Egypt for help, who rely on horses, who trust in the multitude of their chariots and in the great strength of their horsemen, but do not look to the Holy One of Israel, or seek help from the LORD."

B. The prophets reminded God's people that safety and blessedness were conditioned upon their faithful adherence to the covenant and that this adherence involved not only doctrinal conviction but also a sincere submission of their will to obey God with their whole heart and to lead a godly life. Apart from such submission, no amount of sacrifice or ritualistic worship could satisfy the Lord. As Archer says:

This is perhaps the foremost emphasis in the prophets: "Bring no more vain oblations . . . your hands are full of blood . . . Cease to do evil; learn

to do well . . . Come now, let us reason together" (Isa. 1:13-18). It is not that the prophets regarded moral living as the essence of religion, but rather they understood a godly walk to be the unfailing product of a genuine saving faith. They recognized that all men were guilty before God and utterly without hope apart from his redeeming grace (cf. 1 Kings 8:46; Ps. 14:2-3; 130:3; Prov. 20:9; Isa. 53:6; 59:4, 12-16; 64:6; Mic. 7:2); no one could be saved by his own virtue or goodness. But on the other hand, Israel needed to be reminded (as does the professing church in modern times) that God would accept no substitute for a sincere faith which expresses itself by a law-honoring life.

C. The prophets encouraged Israel in respect to the future. In the face of the divine wrath coming on Israel because of its stubborn disobedience, the question arose whether those judgments would mean the end of Israel as a holy nation set apart to witness to the heathen of the one true God. The prophets assured them that, after the devastation of the exile, a believing remnant would be restored to the land. This nation would fulfill its destiny as a testimony to the Gentiles under the leadership of the coming Messiah. This encouraged sincere believers to keep trusting in the Lord.

D. The prophets brought glory to God and confirmed the authoritativeness of his message by making predictions whose fulfillment would be objectively verified. These predictions bear witness to God's wisdom and sovereignty over the future. As the Lord declared in Isa. 48:3-5:

I foretold the former things long ago, my mouth announced them and I made them known; then suddenly I acted, and they came to pass. 4 For I knew how stubborn you were; the sinews of your neck were iron, your forehead was bronze. 5 Therefore I told you these things long ago; before they happened I announced them to you so that you could not say, 'My idols did them; my wooden image and metal god ordained them.'

My understanding is that this aspect of prophecy will be the focus of this class.

V. Reception of the Prophets

A. Since prophets often exposed and called people to repent of their sin, it is not surprising that they often were attacked. It never is easy to speak God's word to a people in love with sin. Recall what Jesus said in Mat. 5:11-12: "Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. 12 Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you."

B. Just consider Jeremiah. In Jer. 11:18-23, the men of Anathoth plotted to kill Jeremiah. In Jer. 20:7-8, Jeremiah complains that he constantly is ridiculed, mocked, and insulted. In chapter 26, Jeremiah is threatened with death. In chapter 37, he was thrown in a dungeon, where he remained a long time. He then was released only to be thrown

into a cistern in chapter 38. According to a Jewish tradition, he was later stoned to death at the hands of Egyptian Jews who were enraged because he had denounced their idolatrous practices (Lane, *Hebrews* 2:390).

C. Being God's man in a fallen world is no picnic. The world's hatred of the voice of God is epitomized in its crucifixion of Christ, the Word incarnate. As Jesus told the disciples in Jn. 15:18-19: "If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated me first. If you belonged to the world, it would love you as its own. As it is, you do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the world. That is why the world hates you." And as Paul told Timothy in 2 Tim. 2:12-13: "In fact, everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted, while evil men and impostors will go from bad to worse, deceiving and being deceived."

VI. Interpreting Prophetic Predictions

A. Prophecies are, of course, in various forms. Some are literal, some are poetical with hyperbolic language, and some include figurative or nonliteral language. So, while some are relatively straightforward, some require a seasoned hand to understand rightly.

B. The fulfillment of some predictions is conditioned on the response of people, whereas the fulfillment of others is unconditional. As the Lord says in 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.

C. Also, prophecy sometimes is "telescoped," meaning the prophet speaks of what is distant as though it were near. As J. Barton Payne writes in his book *Encyclopedia of Biblical Prophecy* (p. 137), "Biblical prophecy may leap from one prominent peak in predictive topography to another, without notice of the valley between, which may involve no inconsiderable lapse in chronology." Robert Shank says in his book *Until: The Coming of Messiah and His Kingdom* (p. 364), "The prophetic perspective is a 'foreshortened perspective' . . . whereby future events are seen as near at hand or already present, though in fulfillment they may prove to be centuries removed from the prophet's day."

D. Prophets clothed their messages in forms familiar to the contemporary scene in which they lived. Amos 9:11-15 provides an example of both this and the foreshortened or telescoped perspective.

1. Amos 9:11-12 speaks of the restoration of the Davidic dynasty. According to James in Acts 15:12-19, Amos was referring to Jesus. Jesus is the descendant of David who was placed by God on David's throne (see, Lk. 1:29-33; Acts

2:29-36, 5:31) and from which he is *now* ruling (Mat. 28:18; Phil. 2:9; Heb. 1:3-4; 1 Pet. 3:22; Rev. 1:5, 3:21). This was announced early in Jesus' life by Simeon and Anna (Lk. 2:25-38). As James argues his case for the inclusion of Gentiles: Jesus is the Davidic king promised by Amos; the restored Davidic kingdom to which Amos referred included Gentiles; therefore, they must permit Gentiles to become Christians, to become participants in that kingdom.

2. In 9:13-15, Amos moves right from the restoration of the Davidic dynasty in Christ to the glory of the eternal state that will be ushered in when Jesus returns. The fact these events are separated in history by thousands of years is not significant; the prophet sees them as a unity, as two mountaintops in his line of prophetic vision.

3. And the unimaginable blessing of the consummated kingdom, the glory of heaven, is portrayed in terms relevant to an eighth-century B.C. audience. This glorious state is depicted or represented by its permanence (v. 15) and by the land's supernatural productivity (v.13). The fact of divine protection and security is represented by being allowed to enjoy the fruit of one's labor (v.14).

E. Prophets sometimes address a generation as representative of generations (or a generation) to follow. For example, Moses in Deut. 4:26ff. addressed his own generation as though they would live to see the Dispersion and the Restoration, which occurred centuries later.

F. A significant issue in interpreting prophecy, especially end time prophecies, is the relationship of Israel and the church. Disagreement over this relationship is a significant part of the disagreement between dispensational premillennialists and amillennialists. If the church is "new Israel," a body consisting of "true Israel" (those Jews who had the faith of Abraham and thus believed in Jesus) and the ingrafted Gentile branches, then the predictions in the O.T. about Israel's future are and will be fulfilled in the church not in national Israel. Because dispensationalists do not believe the church is the heir of these O.T. promises to Israel, they look for them to be fulfilled literally in a national Israel during the millennial age. (Historic premillennialists believe in a literal thousand-year reign of Christ on earth, but they do not accept the distinction dispensational premillennialists draw between Israel and the church.)

VII. False Prophecy

A. There were, of course, false prophets in both the O.T. and the N.T. These are people who claimed to speak the words of God but who in fact did not.

B. In Deut. 18:20-22 the Lord declares:

"But a prophet who presumes to speak in my name anything I have not commanded him to say, or a prophet who speaks in the name of other gods, must be put to death." 21 You may say to yourselves, "How can we

know when a message has not been spoken by the LORD?" 22 If 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. Do not be afraid of him.

Here we see that a failure of the prophecy shows that the prophet was not speaking for God because if God had given him the words, they would have come to pass.

C. But that's not the only test. Deut. 13:1-5 states:

If a prophet, or one who foretells by dreams, appears among you and announces to you a miraculous sign or wonder, 2 and if the sign or wonder of which he has spoken takes place, and he says, "Let us follow other gods" (gods you have not known) "and let us worship them," 3 you must not listen to the words of that prophet or dreamer. The LORD your God is testing you to find out whether you love him with all your heart and with all your soul. 4 It is the LORD your God you must follow, and him you must revere. Keep his commands and obey him; serve him and hold fast to him. 5 That prophet or dreamer must be put to death, because he preached rebellion against the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt and redeemed you from the land of slavery; he has tried to turn you from the way the LORD your God commanded you to follow. You must purge the evil from among you.

If the alleged prophet contradicts the truth of prior revelation by urging people to give allegiance to one other than Yahweh, even if that person accurately predicts the happening of a miraculous sign or wonder, you can be sure he or she is a false prophet.

D. You see this same concept in 2 Thess. 2:7-10, where Paul writes:

For the secret power of lawlessness is already at work; but the one who now holds it back will continue to do so till he is taken out of the way. 8 And then the lawless one will be revealed, whom the Lord Jesus will overthrow with the breath of his mouth and destroy by the splendor of his coming. 9 The coming of the lawless one will be in accordance with the work of Satan displayed in all kinds of counterfeit miracles, signs and wonders, 10 and in every sort of evil that deceives those who are perishing. They perish because they refused to love the truth and so be saved. 11 For this reason God sends them a powerful delusion so that they will believe the lie 12 and so that all will be condemned who have not believed the truth but have delighted in wickedness.

By refusing to love the truth that Jesus is the Christ and thus allowing oneself to be pulled from that conviction by apparent miracles, signs, and wonders, one will be peeled off from the body of believers.

VIII. Prophecy in the N.T.

A. All I will say on this is that some, most notably Wayne Grudem, claim that the words spoken by N.T. prophets were not as authoritative as words spoken by O.T. prophets. They contend that N.T. prophecy was different from O.T. prophecy in that the O.T. prophets spoke the very words of God whereas the N.T. prophets (from which they distinguish the Apostles) provided a potentially fallible human report of the revelation given to them by God.

B. As Robert Saucy has noted:

[This] definition of prophecy fails to see that the Spirit's work of inspiration in prophecy goes all the way to the actual prophecy, that is, the words spoken or written. As Peter says concerning prophecy, "men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit" (2 Peter 1:21). No matter what forms God's revelation to the prophet may entail (e.g., the visions of Ezekiel), the final revelation includes the verbal meaning. That is to say, the prophet's words are God's revelation and thus his words, not simply the human *report* of revelation (cf. 2 Sam. 23:2; Jer. 1:7, 9; 1 Cor. 2:13).