

WHAT'S THE SOURCE OF BIBLE PROPHECIES?

What's their purpose? And how are we to understand and relate to them?

Prophecy is pervasive through the Old Testament, from beginning to end. As soon as Adam and Eve disobeyed and were expelled from the Garden of Eden, God gave them the promise of a Saviour (Gen. 3:15). Later God warned Noah about a flood that would impact the entire world (Gen. 6). Several major prophecies were given to Abraham, the physical and spiritual father of Israel—the Egyptian sojourn of his descendants, for example. The other end of the Old Testament contains the words of prophets such as Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi.

A brief look at the New Testament shows that prophecy is common here, too. This section of the Bible begins with prophecies of the births of John the Baptist and Jesus. And John, who announced the Messiah's coming, was considered by Jesus the greatest of prophets. Jesus Himself concluded His ministry with the great prophetic sermon on Mount Olivet (Matt. 24). Paul recorded his prophetic experiences in his first letter to the Corinthians and his second letter to the Thessalonians. The most obvious example of prophecy in the New Testament, of course, is the book of Revelation.

How did these prophecies come about? Did these people simply decide they were prophets?

The answer is no. Prophets did not work themselves up into an ecstatic state and then "break into prophecy." Rather, they served at God's will, not vice versa—as is illustrated by Balam's story (Num. 22-24). Thus the first point that can be made about the origin of prophecy, as 2 Peter 1:21 puts it, is that "men and women moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God" (NRSV).

How Are Ancient Prophecies Relevant to Us?

The words of the prophets cover a continuum through time. The first frame of reference for their messages is their own day. Their indictment of the people's sins generally come under this category. A good example of this is in Amos 2:6-16, where the prophet castigates the people for current evils. Such a prophecy was not meant for the future, except perhaps as a general warning of the results of that type of behavior. This aspect of the prophetic ministry—speaking for God to a current situation—is sometimes called *forthtelling*.

However, the prophet could also speak to issues in the intermediate or distant future, an activity sometimes referred to as *foretelling*. The length of time that the Jews would be captives in Babylon—70 years, according to Jeremiah (Jer. 25:12), is an example of prophecy dealing with the intermediate future. As God gave His prophets inspired views or words about the future, He spread out before them events ranging from those in the immediate future to those far in the distance—even into eternity.

If the biblical prophets predicted only events that were to occur in the immediate future, they might be suspected of being simply better guessers than their

contemporaries, as some humanistic scholars believe. However, God extended their view to events well beyond the scope of speculation. The prophecies about the nations found in Daniel 2 and 7 present a fascinating example of predictions ranging over many centuries. From a human point of view, Daniel seems to have chosen the least likely alternative for the destiny of the Persian Empire in which he lived; but from a divine point of view he was conveying exactly what God foreknew.

Did Bible Prophecy Fail?

As we read the Old Testament, we run up against certain prophetic predictions that, especially in recent times, have led to questions. They have the form of *eschatological* prophecies—prophecies relating to “the last things.” Did they find fulfillment? Or were the prophets mistaken?

The common element in these prophecies is that they begin with the prophet’s circumstances (commonly the Babylonian exile), then look beyond immediate events into the future. In that future, the prophets were shown what ancient Israel could have become. They saw God’s people returning to their glorified land. They saw Jerusalem as an exalted city—the *world capital*, in fact, into which people from all nations would stream, seeking a knowledge of the true God. The exaltation of this land and the entire world was to continue until it would become, in effect, a new earth.

These prophecies about ancient Israel were never literally fulfilled, however. Why? The *humanistic* answer is that the prophets were not really recipients of divine foreknowledge and had simply guessed wrong. A completely opposite answer, characteristic of some evangelical interpreters (known as dispensationalists), is that, since these prophecies were inspired by God, they must take place—in the literal, present country of Israel.

Seventh-day Adventists take a third approach—one in the middle of the first two. Like the evangelicals, we believe these “failed” prophecies were given by God and are true. But we agree with the humanists that they will not be literally fulfilled in Israel.

How do we reconcile these two points of view? By considering these prophecies *conditional*. As Ellen G. White put it: “The promises and threatenings of God are alike conditional.”¹ Following her lead, we have placed these prophecies in the category of promises—*promises of what could have been if God’s chosen people had cooperated fully with His plan for them*. Unfortunately, they did not. We see the final frustration of God’s plan in the New Testament. Here God’s own people reject the Messiah: “He came to his own home, and his own people received him not” (John 1:11, RSV). While these prophecies will yet be fulfilled in reference to spiritual Israel, the Christian church (Gal. 3:15-29), they no longer apply to a literal Israel in the Middle East.

Two Kinds of Prophecy

Bible students speak of two kinds of prophecy—*classical* and *apocalyptic*. Classical (or typical) prophecy commonly deals with immediate events or issues. *Apocalyptic* prophecy (from a Greek word meaning “to reveal” or “to uncover”) focuses on the

end of human history as we know it. It deals with events in the distant future, especially in regard to the Second Advent. A major example of this type of prophecy is the book of Revelation. Another is the book of Daniel. Passages such as Isaiah 24-27, Zechariah 9-14, and Matthew 24 are also regarded as apocalyptic prophecies.

Apocalyptic prophecy is identifiable by a number of characteristics. 1. There is a more frequent reference to visions than in classical prophecy. 2. There is a more intense use of symbols. 3. It frequently deals with the distant future. 4. There is often intense contrast of good and evil, sometimes symbolized by light and darkness. (We see this, for example, in Revelation's description of the great controversy between Christ and Satan.) 5. Apocalyptic prophets not infrequently mention an interpreting angel who helps them understand the message received.

By this point you have a good handle on the subject. But in what follows, we want to say a word about four important approaches to interpreting prophecy that you may find helpful.

Four Approaches to Prophetic Interpretation

Students of prophecy generally fall into four interpretive schools of thought: *historicists, preterists, futurists, and dualists.*

1. The *historicist* interpretation sees apocalyptic prophecies as revealing human history in a continuous fashion. They believe, for example, that the prophecies in Daniel and Revelation present the great sweep of the future from the prophet's time to Christ's coming kingdom. Strong evidence for this can be found in the major series of symbols extending through the centuries, in both Daniel and Revelation. Daniel 2 and 7, for instance, present a series of metal and animal figures that symbolize kingdoms that will succeed one another until the eternal kingdom of God is set up (the stone of Daniel 2) or until the time when the saints of the Most High enter the eternal kingdom of God (in Daniel 7). Daniel 11 and 12 repeat the pattern, describing the actions of individual rulers along the way.

Thus there is strong internal evidence from the book of Daniel (and also from Revelation) that these prophecies were intended to give their hearers and readers a view of the sweep of history from God's vantage point.

However, there are those who have denied this historic point of view, applying the fulfillment of events mostly in the past (*preterist*), or mostly in the future (*futurist*).

2. *Preterists*, applying the book of Daniel in the past, for example, see its prophecies ending in the second century B.C.—in the time of Antiochus IV Epiphanes, a Greek king who ruled in Syria. Since he was a cruel king who did evil things to the Jews, preterists see him as the fulfillment of the bad things that were to happen to God's people. From this point of view, the book of Daniel was not written in the sixth century B.C. as future prophecy. Instead, they believe, it was written in the second century B.C. *while these events were happening*. So the conclusion is that the book of Daniel is not prophecy, but rather history—written up as prophecy by an unknown author.

3. For *futurists*, the prophecies did begin during the prophet's own time. But then the great prophetic clock stopped. There was a gap, and major segments of human history—such as Christ's earthly ministry and the early Christian church—have simply not been addressed by prophecy. Futurists subscribing to the dispensationalist position are waiting for the prophetic clock to start up again. When it does, they will count down the final seven years of earth's history (the seventieth week of Daniel 9), during which, they believe, there will be a final (literal and personal) antichrist who will appear in Israel and persecute the Jews for three and one-half years. Meanwhile, the church, having been raptured out of the world, will have left the Jews to be persecuted by this antichrist and his followers. These final seven years will end with the second coming of Christ—actually the third coming for them. Thus for the futurists, the great sweep of the Christian Age is represented only by a gap. Prophecy did not address it at all.

4. Dualists want to take a "both and" approach. And what occurred in Catholicism in the sixteenth century and in Protestantism in the nineteenth century is now being repeated among some Adventists.

In the early 1980s a controversy over prophetic interpretation developed in the Seventh-day Adventist Church. At that time preterism was offered as an alternative to historicism. Under the label of "dual interpretation of prophecy," people were told they could keep their historicist view, "adding" preterism to it.

Under these conditions, however, true historicism fades away. After holding a major study conference in 1980, the Adventist Church rejected preterism. The world delegates assembled for study in Glacier View, Colorado, affirmed their adherence to the biblical and historic views held by the founders of Adventism, who saw themselves as a prophetic movement, raised up at a certain time to announce specific prophetic truths for this particular time.

Where Do We Go From Here?

Which of these interpretations is right? The preterist's position leaves the impression that God has been quite uninterested in us since the second century B.C. (when, they claim, Daniel was written) or since the first century A.D. (when Revelation was written). For since then, according to them, God has really not spoken. It's a truncated view of God's activity in history. The futurist faces the same problem, but claims that all these prophecies relate to our time alone. The dual approach seems to want the best of both worlds.

For the historicist, God's prophetic voice has continued to speak to all ages. Just as the Old Testament has provided us with a history from Creation to the end of the Old Testament Era, so these apocalyptic books provide us a panoramic view of our Christian Era in advance.

The Protestant Reformers were distinctly historicist. One of the events they observed was the activity of the "little horn" of Daniel 7:7-26, which they identified with the Papacy in Rome.

Quite naturally, papal scholars saw things differently and attempted to parry the Reformers' thrust during the Catholic Counter Reformation in the latter half of the sixteenth century. In 1590 Francisco Ribera of Spain published a lengthy commentary on Revelation in which he denied the Protestant interpretation and applied the prophecies in the future. Meanwhile, a Spanish interpreter named Luis de Alcazar introduced the preterist interpretation into Catholic circles.

Similar developments did not occur in Protestantism until considerably later. The first preterist approach to the book of Daniel in Protestant circles came with Anthony Collins' commentary published in 1726. Up to this time almost all prominent Protestant interpreters were historicists. With the inroads of rationalism, humanism, and liberal thought in the nineteenth century, however, many mainline Protestant denominations drifted toward preterism.

Futurist interpretation of apocalyptic prophecy was introduced by an Englishman named John Darby in the 1820s, at the time William Miller was preaching the prophecies of Jesus coming from a strongly historicist point of view.

At present, preterist views are held mostly by the liberal mainline Protestant denominations, while futurist views are found especially among conservative evangelicals. The historicist interpretation of prophecy has continued, however, through the teaching and preaching of Seventh-day Adventists. In a sense, our church stands virtually alone as the heir of the Reformers' interpretation of Bible prophecy.

Much time has elapsed since these Bible prophecies were given. That means we have almost reached the end of time as we know it. Maranatha! May we be ready for Christ's soon coming.

¹ Ellen G. White, *Selected Messages*, book 1, p. 67.

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