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## The Prophets Study 8: Prophecy

### ***Background***

This study is the last in our series of studies on the prophets, and having looked at a number of the prophets in Scripture (and not just those we read of in the Old Testament) we wanted to complete the series by looking at prophecy itself. We will therefore take a brief look at the meaning of prophet, group the prophets in the Hebrew Scriptures, explore the timeframe of Biblical prophecy, and review the gift of prophecy.

We have certainly not covered all the ground on this subject or theme. It is clear though that there is much we can learn by studying the prophets; not only about God's character, but also about the type of people whom God uses. We can also see how many issues that faced the prophets also face us today - the challenges include:

- Are we ready to respond to God's calling?;
- Are we listening to the prophetic voices we may hear today?

### ***The Message***

#### **The meaning of prophet**

The word 'prophet' comes from the Greek word 'prophētēs', which literally means 'one who proclaims'. In Hebrew, there are three words commonly used in this context; 'nābî', from a root meaning 'to bubble forth, as from a fountain', hence 'to utter' (compare Psalm 45:1). This Hebrew word is the first and the most generally used for a prophet. In the time of Samuel another word, rō`eh, 'seer', began to be used (1 Samuel 9:9). It occurs seven times in reference to Samuel. Afterwards another word, hōzeh, 'seer' (2 Samuel 24:11), was employed. In 1 Chronicles 29:29 all these three words are used: 'Samuel the seer (rō`eh), Nathan the prophet (nābî), Gad the seer' (hōzeh). A prophet is different to a teacher in that a teacher imparts truths already revealed.

#### **Groups of prophets in the Old Testament**

We can divide the prophets in the Hebrew Scriptures into four groups:

1. The **prophets of the northern kingdom** (Israel); Hosea (1), Amos (2), Joel (3), Jonah (4).
2. The **prophets of Judah**; Isaiah (5), Jeremiah (6), Obadiah (7), Micah (8), Nahum (9), Habakkuk (10), Zephaniah (11).
3. The **prophets of Captivity**; Ezekiel (12) and Daniel (13).



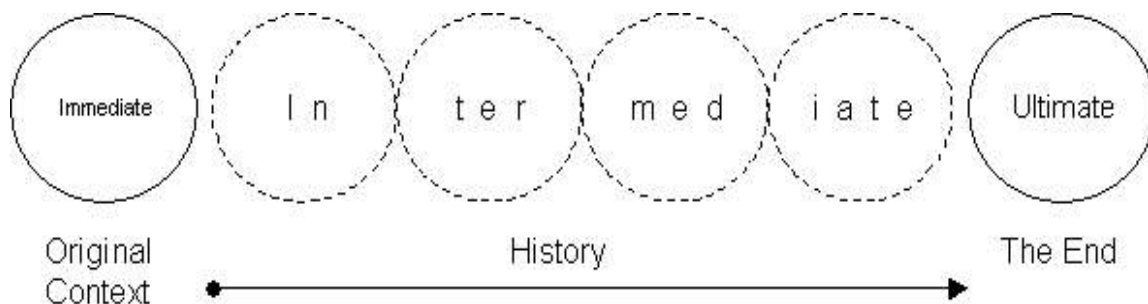
4. The **prophets of the Restoration**; Haggai (14), Zechariah (15), and Malachi (16).

**Timeframes for Biblical Prophecy**

It is clear that prophecy in Scripture so often crosses three time-frames, bringing with it dimensions of fulfilment:

- ! Fulfilment at, or soon after, the time of prophecy;
- ! Fulfilment in the first coming of Jesus Christ;
- ! Fulfilment in the second coming of Jesus Christ.

Others have commented that biblical prophecy may be termed ‘iterative’<sup>1</sup>. This can perhaps be expressed most simply in the form of a diagram:



**Figure 1:** Iterative fulfilment of prophecy.

Here, “the immediate fulfilment in its original context is well-defined, as is the ultimate fulfilment, by the descriptions given in the biblical texts themselves. Thus they are shown in the diagram as distinct, solid circles. The various intermediate ‘fulfilments’ occurring throughout history, however, are dotted circles, to show that their definition is uncertain or only partial, and conjoined to show that these are a part of our continuous history as opposed to The Beginning (the original context of prophecy) and The End (the ultimate fulfilment of the prophecy)”.

Fulfilment of prophecy can therefore be in any part of this time horizon, or just simply in one part of the time horizon. We can also see in Scripture examples of where prophecy is fulfilled and is being fulfilled.

<sup>1</sup><http://www.bombaxo.com/iterative.html> (With permission from Kevin P. Edgecomb of Berkeley, California)



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### **The gift of prophecy**

The Bible tells us “*Keep on pursuing love, yet be seeking earnestly the spiritual gifts, especially the ability to prophesy.*” (1 Corinthians 14: 1). Prophecy may be described as proclamation of a message of edification, exhortation, consolation and rebuke. It should be linked intrinsically with discernment. We know it to be one of the gifts of the Spirit (Romans 12: 6; 1 Corinthians 12: 10, 28; Ephesians 4: 11). What a prophet says is not of man but of God (2 Peter 1: 20, 21). I think that prophecy is when a servant of God speaks with wisdom or knowledge imparted from God into a situation with a declaration that is fully in keeping with the character of God. This declaration may often relate to the now and the not yet, more often to something in the future, but certainly beyond human ability or knowledge - genuine prophecy can only come from God.

Satan has established false prophets:

*“But be watching out for the false prophets, who come to you in sheep’s clothing, but inwardly are ravenous wolves. By their fruits you will know them. They do not gather a grape cluster from thorns, or figs from thistles, do they?”* (Matthew 7: 15 - 16)

*“For such ones are false apostles, deceitful labourers, disguising themselves as apostles of Christ. And no wonder! For even Satan disguises himself as an angel of light. Therefore, it is not a great thing if also his servants are disguised as servants of righteousness, whose end will be according to their works.”* (2 Corinthians 11: 13 - 15)

### **Examples of prophecy in Scripture**

There are many prophecies regarding the Jewish nation, and its founder Abraham and his posterity (Genesis 12: 1 - 3; 13: 16; 15: 5; 17:2, 4 - 6, etc.). Similarly there are many prophecies relating to Isaac and Jacob and their descendants (Genesis 12: 7; 13: 14, 15, 17; 15: 18 - 21; Ex. 3: 8, 17), which have all been fulfilled.

The twenty-eighth chapter of Deuteronomy contains a series of predictions which are even now in the present day being fulfilled.

We have learned in our earlier studies on the prophets in this series about prophecies regarding the events which were to befall God’s people. There are also many prophecies relating to those nations with which the Jews came into contact. Despite this, much of what we read of prophecy in the Hebrew Scriptures relates directly to the advent of the Messiah, beginning with Gen. 3:15, the first great promise, and extending in ever-increasing fulness and clearness all through Christ Himself. Perhaps one of the most poignant is the messianic account we read of in Isaiah 53.



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Prophecy was not restricted to the Hebrew Scriptures alone. Many prophecies were pronounced by Jesus and the apostles (Matthew 11: 23; 19: 28; 25: 31 - 46; 26:17 - 35 etc.)

### **Questions**

1. Think about the prophets we have studied and the message they bring to the people. What sort of things do they have in common? Why do they have differences?
2. Is prophecy alive today?
3. How can we discern the truth of prophecy (Deuteronomy 13:1-5, Matthew 7:15-23, John 16:13-14)?
4. Does God ever call us to be prophets (Joel 2:28-32)? How might God equip us?
5. What type of person does God call to be a prophet?
6. How do you think we should respond to prophecy and prophets, today and in the Bible?
7. How do you think the gift of prophecy should be exercised today (1 Corinthians 14:1ff, 1 Thessalonians 5:19-21)?