

Prophecy & Vision

Understanding the texts that interpret the times

SAYS THE LORD

Direction and hope

‘Where there is no prophecy,
the people cast off restraint.’
(Prov 29:18)

The word ‘prophecy’ holds a deep fascination for people. The popular understanding of the concept almost always associates it with ‘revealing’ or ‘foretelling’ the future; something the human psyche has an insatiable desire for. However, this is a mistaken notion, in terms of the biblical use of the word, but nevertheless it has left its mark on the way many Christians approach the prophetic writings of Scripture. There is probably no literature in the Bible that has been more open to misuse than that of the prophets. Christians have frequently brought the study of prophecy into disrepute, and it is for this reason that we need to equip ourselves carefully with the skills to study and interpret it.

As the writer in Proverbs quoted above declares, the word and vision of the prophet are vital and serve the purposes of God in many different ways. They bring direction, correction, instruction and so much more; and underlying everything they bring the sense of that forward dynamic thrust towards God’s ultimate purposes which lies at the heart of biblical hope.

Prophecy focuses hope, it inspires commitment and discipline within individuals and the community of faith. It centres people’s attention upon destiny. Because prophecy plays such a vital, cohesive and guiding role it is essential that its truth is read, understood and responded to.

God’s servants the prophets

‘Surely the Lord God does nothing,
without revealing his secret
to his servants the prophets.’
(Amos 3:7)

The prophetic books are the most numerous of any group in the Hebrew Scriptures, but they are also the most difficult parts of Scripture to read, understand and interpret. While there are 15 collections of canonical oracles (Latter Prophets) attributed to different prophets, there were of course hundreds of prophets throughout biblical history whose words were only fleetingly referred to in the text or not recorded at all (in the Former Prophets). For example:

- Elijah and Elisha (1 Kings 17 – 2 Kings 13);



- Gad (1 Samuel 22; 2 Samuel 24);
- Nathan (2 Samuel 7; 12; 1 Kings);
- Huldah (2 Kings 22).

So in the narrative portions of the 'Former Prophets' we hear a lot *about* prophets and very little *from* the prophets, while in the prophetic texts of the 'Latter Prophets' we hear from God and very little about the prophets themselves. However, in every case we are confronted with men and women who were unmistakably the servants of God.

The vital question is, 'How are we to understand these words that God has revealed to his servants?' History has clearly shown that if the prophetic writings are not approached with wisdom and caution they become a minefield and provide a licence for every conceivable theory and speculation. While the nature of prophecy is such that we know we will not be able to plumb all its depths or reveal all its mysteries, we should nonetheless be able to handle the material in a way that draws out the essential truth and avoids the major pitfalls. Two vital initial tasks are to understand:

- The function of prophecy;
- The form of prophecy.

At all stages it is also essential to have teachable minds and humble spirits. It is our purpose, then, to look broadly at the factors that must be taken into account when interpreting the prophetic scriptures.

NATURE OF PROPHECY

Telling forth God's character

Prophecy is addressed specifically to the people of God; those people bound to him by covenant and not the people of other nations directly.¹ The prophet is a messenger from God, and the word they carry; whether calling for a response or giving a promise, is always first and foremost a revelation of God's character. The first question we should be asking about any specific prophetic passage is, 'What does this tell me about the qualities of God's distinctive nature and person?'²

The popular belief held by so many people, which we noted above, that prophecy is essentially predictive, is a diversion. Christians so often approach the prophetic writings with just such an idea. This obscures the essential

¹ There is of course an exception in the case of Jonah.

² This is of course true of all Scripture and in that sense it is correct to say that all Scripture is prophetic.



message and makes their use of the text highly selective. It is important to remember that:

- Less than 5% of Hebrew prophecy anticipates the new covenant;
- Less than 2% of Hebrew prophecy is messianic;
- Less than 1% of Hebrew prophecy concerns events still to come.

First and foremost prophecy is 'forth-telling' rather than 'foretelling'. The burden of prophecy is essentially 'moral'. There can be, and of course are, future predictions. But even any future prediction is essentially God declaring what he will do *because of who he is*. There will be either judgment or blessing depending upon an individual or nation's response to him. God never simply reveals the hidden and unknown for its own sake; if he does it is by way of revealing himself.

Proclaiming the covenant

The covenant relationship with Yahweh forged at Sinai is the essential foundation for the work of every Hebrew prophet. The prophets stood firmly upon the covenant as the basis of their authority. It was against the covenant that they measured the state of individuals and nations. It was to the demands of the covenant that they called people to return. Moses was the greatest of the prophets (Deut 34:10), and he was the one who mediated the original covenant at Sinai; all other prophets stand in his pattern. They are mediators between Yahweh and the people on the basis of the covenant.

The prophets bring God's word, not their own, to those to whom they have been sent. The foundations of that word are found in the fabric of the original covenant (cf. Leviticus 26; Deut 4:28-32). It is essentially expressed in either promises of blessing or declarations of trouble:

Blessing

Life
Health
Prosperity
Abundance
Respect
Safety

Trouble

Death
Disease
Drought
Dearth
Danger
Disgrace

Destruction
Defeat
Depopulation
Destitution

When reading a prophetic passage look for the pattern:

- Identify the declaration of God's love *or* the destructive sin;
- Identify the promise of blessing *or* the prediction of trouble.

The prophet's sole authority for speaking out was the fact that they had



individually responded to God's personal call to them (cf. Jer 1:4-19; Isa 6:8-13; Amos 7:14-15).³ Any prophet who was self-motivated was essentially false (cf. Jer 14:14; 23:21). Much of what they said was prefaced by the phrase, 'Says the Lord'. The oracles present God speaking in the first person, 'I' and 'Me'. The prophets could be very creative in how they delivered their message, but they were not innovative. They delivered God's word, not as they imagined it but as they heard it. They were ambassadors of the heavenly court relaying God's word to his people as he had spoken it.

WORKING WITH PROPHECY

Discover context

Every biblical prophecy was spoken into a distinct historical situation, within the framework of the prophet's own time and experience. It is this specific point in time and place that gives the context to the prophecy and determines its 'outward form'. Therefore the absolutely essential first step in interpreting any prophecy is to determine the prophet's actual historical circumstance. This needs to happen at two levels:

Broad context

The 15 classical (latter) prophetic writings in Scripture fall within the narrow period between 760–460 BCE (from Amos to Malachi) – only 300 years; a time of specific crisis within Israel and Judah:

- Unprecedented political, military, economic and social upheaval;
- Fundamental unfaithfulness and disregard for the covenant;
- Major shifts in population and national boundaries.

These are the particular historical events that the classical prophets speak to and so it is vital to be aware of what they involved.

Specific context

Each oracle spoke to an even more precise historical setting and so it is vital to fix the date and situation even more precisely if possible (e.g. Isaiah 6: 'in the year that King Uzziah died').

³ The Hebrew word for 'prophet' is *nābî*, which comes from the verb *nābā*; the prophet is one who is called by God.



Think oracles

In the Hebrew prophetic writings it is the 'oracle' that makes up the basic unit of thought. These need to be identified before interpretation can properly take place. In practice this can often prove to be rather difficult because the text has frequently been edited by grouping together a number of oracles from different times and places and running them together as a group, which often provides few clues as to the links, the chronology or the historical setting.

Occasionally the oracles are dated, as in Haggai and the early part of Zechariah. But this is rare. In most instances readers, with the help of scholars via commentaries, have to decide where individual oracles begin and end for themselves. For example, the text of Amos 5 is widely agreed to contain three oracles:

- **vv 1-3:** an invitation to seek God and live;
- **vv 4-17:** an attack on social injustice;
- **vv 18-27:** a prediction of miseries.

The primary means by which we identify the size, shape and extent of a particular oracle is by learning to recognise their 'forms'.

Recognise forms

There are of course a wide variety of 'forms' used in prophetic oracles. Three very distinctive ones are:

- The lawsuit (cf. Isa 3:13-26; Hos 3:3-17) - summons, charge, evidence, verdict;
- The 'Woe' (cf. Hab 2:6-8; Zeph 2:5-7) - cry of those facing death or a funeral;
- The promise (Amos 9:11-15; Ezek 34: 22-32) - future, radical change, blessing.

As we have noted above, the outward 'form' of a prophecy is determined by the historical circumstance in which it was formed. The first step in the exegetical task is to understand it in ways it would have been possible to understand it during the prophet's own time. This is the essential base upon which all further interpretation must be built.

It is of course quite possible that the written style of some prophecies have subsequently been edited from their original form to make them accessible to a wider public. This would have been done either by the prophet themselves or by their disciples. Whether or not this has happened, the necessity of recognising the form of the oracle and identifying its historical setting remains paramount.

UNDERSTANDING PROPHECY

Prophetic language

The language in which the prophecies are written can often present an obstacle to interpretation. One of the reasons for this is that so much prophecy is written in poetry.⁴ This helps them to express truth in very important ways. Also, in a world in which few people had access to written media, it made the prophecies highly memorable and thus able to be retained in the thoughts of the individual and to be passed from mouth to mouth. Poetry gives to prophecy:

- Rhythm;
- Balance;
- Structure.

Prophets also used a more formal style of poetic prose that had the same characteristics but was less regular.

As well as being poetic, the words of the prophet often have a vividness and freedom that is both symbolic and frequently extravagant:

'Every valley shall be lifted up,
and every mountain and hill made low ...'
(Isa 40:4)

The words are certainly communicating 'truth' and they will be seen to be fulfilled, but they are not necessarily a 'literalistic' description of what will happen. It is helpful to understand the prophetic language of the future by reflecting on the poetic language of the past. In Psalm 114 the writer looks back at the events of the Exodus and the crossing of the river Jordan:

'The sea looked and fled;
Jordan turned back.
The mountains skipped like rams,
the hills like lambs.
(vv 3-4)

We know that it did not happen exactly like this, *but* the language describes exactly the power, emotion and importance of the events. The same must also be true of prophetic language. What is said will happen, but the language used is communicating much more than just a description of what will physically take place. It points us to the significance in the deepest and broadest sense.

⁴ The nature of Hebrew poetry is discussed in more detail in Session 6.



Prophecy as conditional

Prophecy is not a chronological statement that is establishing a predetermined timetable; it is conditional. God has his overall plan and purposes that he will bring about, but within that framework there are choices. The prophet's task is to deliver a message from Yahweh, to challenge and change lives in the face of impending judgment. The biblical mind does not wonder in amazement that God's plans can be chronologically predicted, but rather that he can change his plans in response to repentance or disobedience:

At one moment I may declare concerning a nation or a kingdom, that I will pluck up and break down and destroy it, but if that nation, concerning which I have spoken, turns from its evil, I will change my mind about the disaster that I intended to bring on it. And at another moment I may declare concerning a nation or a kingdom that I will build and plant it, but if it does evil in my sight, not listening to my voice, then I will change my mind about the good that I had intended to do (Jer 18:7-9).

... for I knew you were a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and ready to repent from punishing (Jonah 4:2).

Scripture is quite clear that prophetic concern is ethical first and foremost.

New covenant perspective

The way in which the New Testament interprets the Hebrew prophets should be our guide. The New Testament is God's own commentary on the Hebrew text. Jesus Christ is the focus and fulfilment of all prophecy:

"Oh, how foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have declared" ... Then beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures (Luke 24:25-27).

It is clear that 'all the promises of God find their "yes" in him' (2 Cor 1:19-20). The first and second coming of Jesus, and all that means to the people of God and the world, give ultimate fulfilment to prophecy.

PROMISE AND FULFILMENT

Dimensions of fulfilment

The whole question of how we are to understand and expect the fulfilment of prophecy is very important. The first thing we need to recognise is that there are different possible dimensions of fulfilment to a particular prophecy.

Fulfilment within the historical horizon of the prophet

For example, the prophecies of Jeremiah about the return of the exiles were fulfilled in 539 BCE as a result of the Edict of Cyrus.



Fulfilment at the first coming of Jesus

For example, The promise that someone would sit on David's throne forever was seen as being fulfilled in Jesus (Luke 1:30-33).

Fulfilment at the Parousia

For example, the new Jerusalem, new temple and the new heaven and earth of Ezekiel's vision is fulfilled in Rev 21:1-22.

Progressive fulfilment

Zech 12:10 speaks of the pouring out of a spirit of compassion and supplication, 'so that, when they look on him whom they have pierced, they shall mourn for him':

- It was prophetic of repentance among the Jews of Zechariah's day;
- It was prophetic of Jesus' crucifixion (Matt 24:30; John 19:33-37);
- It is prophetic of the *parousia* (Rev 1:5-7).

Literal and spiritual fulfilment

Apart from the questions presented by 'poetic' language, there is a further sense in which it is important to ask if we should understand whether the fulfilment of prophecy will be 'literal' or 'spiritual':

- If a prophecy applies only to the time of the prophet we can expect it to be fulfilled literally in terms of the prophecy given;
- If a prophecy is wholly predictive of the new covenant we must look for fulfilment according to both the new covenant Spirit and the altered conditions of the world;
- If a prophecy has several possible fulfilments each will have its own characteristics determined by the spiritual and cultural circumstances.

Prophecy is not always literally fulfilled. This was the case with Joel's prophecy (2:28) on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2:17). In fact, the fulfilment of prophecy frequently goes beyond the original prediction. On the basis of the prophecies in the Hebrew Scriptures, who could have anticipated the actual fulfilment of the messianic predictions in the way that they happened?

As a prophecy passes beyond its own historical situation, its form is 'transcended' and its substance is 'transmuted'; this change is guided by new covenant principles. So the Hebrew Scriptures must be read in the light of the New Testament. The interpreter must continually distinguish between what in the original prophecy has 'restricted validity' and what has 'permanent validity'; like the husk of the seed disintegrating to set the kernel free.

The fulfilment of prophecy will be real; what is said will come to pass, but the correspondence between prophecy and fulfilment will not be 'literalistic'. Reality



is never abandoned though fulfilment is 'idealistic'; the idea is fulfilled even though the rest of the form is abandoned:

- The fulfilment of the acorn is the oak tree;
- The fulfilment of the apple blossom is the ripe fruit.

The fact that many of the prophecies are very 'materialistic' in their vision of fulfilment has led some to suggest their fulfilment will be in an essentially 'spiritual' sense. How do you expect the words of Isaiah to be fulfilled?

'The wolf shall live with the lamb,
the leopard shall lie down with the kid,
the calf and the lion and the fatling together,
and a little child shall lead them.'
(Isa 11: 6)

Will it actually happen? Will it simply be 'spiritually' fulfilled or will it have a real and literal, if not literalistic fulfilment?⁵

What we have said above warns against a literalistic expectation, and without doubt it is the spiritual truth in which the fulfilment lies. There are clear examples of a prophecy having a spiritual rather than materialistic fulfilment; as in the case of Amos' prophesying and James' preaching:

'On that day I will raise up the booth of David which is fallen,
and repair its breaches, and raise up its ruins,
and rebuild it as in the days of old ...'
(Amos 9:11; cf. Acts 15:16-17)

What Amos says is not literally fulfilled, nor is it fulfilled in the way the original words would lead you to expect. However, James points to Amos' words being both spiritually and yet literally fulfilled in the church in a way that far exceeds the impression originally given.

However, we must be equally cautious that prophecies are not 'spiritualised' away; which it is very easy to do. The fact that the 'fulfilled' form of the prophecy will very likely be quite different from the 'predicted' form is not to say it will have no form at all:

- The crucifixion of Jesus was a real fulfilment of Isaiah 53;
- When John the Baptist questioned whether Jesus was the Messiah (Luke 7:18-23) he was told what people had seen, which was a clear, tangible fulfilment of Isaiah 61.

⁵ The rabbis struggled with this one and concluded that Yahweh would make it happen even if he had to put a fence between them!



Language and fulfilment

Another important aspect of the relationship between prophecy and its fulfilment is the way in which language is used. This of course lies behind much of what we have said above. The fact is that eschatological language is often metaphorical; it may often speak about immediate events in the language and imagery of final events. However, this does not mean that they are necessarily predictions of final events as such.

A classic example of this is the powerful vision presented to Ezekiel of the 'valley of dry bones' (37:1-14). Here, using the language of the resurrection of the dead, an idea solely associated with the end of the world, God predicts the return of Israel from exile. This was fulfilled in 538 BCE; long before the final eschaton but profoundly significant nonetheless!

The profound significance between this 'present–future' tension, highlighted in this case by the metaphorical use of language, will be developed in more detail below.

New covenant reworking

There are a number of places in the New Testament where the writers quote passages from the Hebrew Scriptures and give them a prophetic interpretation which is quite beyond any clear meaning which they could have had in their original setting. Two examples are:

- **1 Cor 10:4** 'they drank from the spiritual rock that accompanied them and that rock was Christ' (cf Exod 17:1-7; Num 20:1-13);
- **Matt 2:15** 'out of Israel I have called my son' (cf Hos 11:1).

The writer of Matthew's Gospel uses this technique more extensively than any other New Testament writer, e.g. 1:22-23 (Isa 7:14); 2:17-18 (Jer 31:15); compare John 12:15 with Zechariah 9:9; and so it goes on. This shows us how the writers of the New Testament, as representatives of the thinking of the early church, saw the traditions of the Hebrew Scriptures pointing towards and finding their fulfilment in Jesus.

The principle used is that of 'analogy' – 'a correspondence in certain respects of things that are otherwise different'. It was a technique used by Jewish rabbis and writers at the time and would have been well understood by the original readers. It is a technique that can be, and has been, grossly misused by Christian Bible interpreters in subsequent centuries. The key is to see the way in which each writer uses the method on each individual occasion and the point they are making in so doing. When this is done with the help of good modern commentaries its validity will become clear and its misuse avoided.



Scholars have identified several ways in which the NT uses biblical prophecy.

Sensus Plenior

The *sensus plenior* is defined as an additional, deeper or fuller meaning than the literal meaning. That deeper sense can only be understood when its fuller sense is finally revealed. This works on the analogy of a seed and a tree. 'In the seed are all the elements that will ultimately develop into the tree, its leaves, and its fruit. Yet careful analysis of that seed, even under the highest-powered microscope, will not reveal those elements. So it is, I believe, with Scripture'.⁶

Midrash

The NT writers are steeped in Jewish methods of interpretation, which now appear strange to us. For example, Hillel the Elder formulated seven rules of interpretation:

- What is true in a less important instance is surely true in a more important instance. E.g. Matt 6:26.
- One passage may be explained by another if similar words or phrases are present. E.g. Matt 2:2,7 referring to Num 24:17.
- Constructing a principle from one passage. E.g. resurrection of the dead from Exod 3:14-15 in Mark 12:26-27.
- Constructing a principle from two passages. E.g. Matt 2:13-15 draws on Hosea 11:1 and the LXX of Num 24:7-8 'There shall come a man out of his seed and he shall rule over many nations ... God led him out of Egypt'.
- The general and the particular. E.g. Mark 12:28-34 – the two general commandments sum up all the particular ones.
- Like something in another passage. E.g. Matt 2:23 – root consonants for 'Nazareth' in Hebrew are the same as those for 'branch' which has Messianic overtones (Isa 4:2; 11:1; Jer 23:5; Zech 3:8, etc.).
- Word of instruction from its context. This is similar to contemporary exegesis.

PERSPECTIVE OF PROPHECY

Theocracy not chronology

The biblical perspective of prophecy is often distorted and misinterpreted by us for two clear reasons:

- Our insistence that prophecy is primarily predicting the future;
- Our belief that history is essentially linear and chronological.

⁶ W. S. LaSor, "The *Sensus Plenior* and Biblical Interpretation," *A Guide to Contemporary Hermeneutics: Major Trends in Biblical Interpretation* (ed. D. K. McKim; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986) 61.



Both these views are flawed and quite foreign to the ancient eastern way of thinking. The prophetic mind was not primarily concerned with either prediction or chronology. In proclaiming the message the prophets take their stand in the present and view the future as a great canvas of God's redemptive working in the great eschatological future. Their concern is always with the height and breath of the subject; there is constantly a lack of the clear dimension of depth. God's final eschatological purpose is always in the background, but the prophets' primary concern is with Yahweh's present will for his people – therefore the ultimate future is always seen in terms of the immediate future.

The prophets always proclaimed God's ultimate will for the people here and now, with little chronological differentiation. We must not attempt to separate the 'present-future' elements from each other, as this would destroy the biblical perspective. A single, prophetic hope embraces both the immediate historical situation and the ultimate eschatological future as one whole.

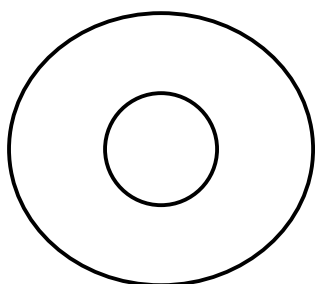
The lack of interest in a detailed chronology is due to the 'theocentric' nature of Israel's hope; hope which is focused on the present acting of God rather than the future redemptive purposes and ultimate consummation. The God who will finally reveal himself in action is acting now; this gives us confidence.

Present-future tension

Another way to view the prophetic perspective is to see the future standing in tension with the present. The future is always spoken of in relation to the present and conversely the present is always viewed in relation to the future:

- The temporal seen in the light of the eternal;
- The ultimate seen in the light of the immediate.

Eschatology is not an end in itself, detached and on the horizons of time; rather it finds its significance in its relationship to history. In the same way, the immediate future can only be understood within the context of God's ultimate purpose. Thus there is a continual and essential tension, each balancing the other. The end resonates into the present; like train tracks 'singing' even before the engine is in view.



Prophetic view

Present-future superimposed



Historical view

Two separate events



As we have said above, the prophets are not philosophers but preachers. Their main concern is with the moral state of the people. While their messages often contain a predictive element, their centre of gravity, their focus of concern, is the will of God *now* rather than the future. They tell Israel how she is to act in the light of her divinely ordained future. The people of God must act *now* as they will act *then*, or they will discover they have no part in it.

Foretelling and fulfilment

While we have emphasised throughout that prophecy was not primarily concerned with predicting the future; prophets did, nevertheless, predict it. What we need to remember, however, is that most of what they predicted in the future is now in the past for us!

There are of course events which the prophets prophesy which do belong to the final events of the age (e.g. Joel 3:1-3; Zeph 3:8-9; Zech 14:9). What we must beware of is that clearly historical events are not pushed into the future as well.⁷ But this must be carefully held in tension with the fact that there can also be definite dimensions of fulfilment, as we have discussed above.

The prophetic anticipation of the 'Day of the Lord' can give added help in our understanding of the biblical perspective of prophecy in terms of foretelling and fulfilment:

- Some references to the 'Day of the Lord' speak of an imminent day of judgment within the near historical situation (cf. Amos 2:5; 3:9-11; 4:12);
- Other references to the 'Day of the Lord' see a further visitation which is an eschatological event, beyond which is final salvation (cf. Amos 7:4; 8:8-9; 9:5).

As we have seen above, two visitations, one near (historical) and one far (eschatological) are rarely marked out in time. They are frequently blended together as one day:

- In Isaiah 13 the prophecy speaks in terms of a universal day of judgment, yet what is actually being described is the historical judgment of Babylon.
- In Joel and Zephaniah history and eschatology are inseparable; particular acts of judgment in history are seen as part of the overall judgment of God that will be consummated in the Day of the Lord.

Each act of judgment is a clear guarantee that the final day promised would come. Therefore, each foreshadowing and the final consummation are one act, 'The Day of the Lord'.

⁷ This becomes a point of real issue in the whole discussion of the Jews in terms of both God's long-term and eschatological purpose for them.



This overlapping and infusing of the 'historical' and 'eschatological' is seen very clearly in the use of the 'prophetic perfect'; it is another important literary device used by the prophets and needs to be recognised. For example, in Lam 1:12; 2:1 and 2:21-22 the 'Day of the Lord' in the future is so certain that it is spoken about as being already past!

Where the eschatological Day of the Lord clearly stands on the horizon line of history it is usually prefaced by 'the days are coming', or 'at that time', or 'in that day' (cf Isa 2:2ff.; Hos 3:5; Ezek 38:16; Amos 9:13ff.; Jer 33:16; 31:31ff.; Zeph 3:20). However, the phrase can also be used for a historical visitation; so beware making it an infallible marker!

Expanding fulfilment

Prophecies are not necessarily fulfilled at once. That is why fulfilment within history can appear to be a pale reflection of the original, confident prophetic prediction. There can be 'real' fulfilment without 'total' fulfilment. It has been said, 'Promises that have been fulfilled in history are not thereby exhausted of their content, but remain as promises on a different level, although they are to some extent metamorphosed in the process.' God's promise to Abraham has been fulfilled and yet it still remains to be fulfilled. Some clear points come through about the prophets' perspective:

- They view the present in the light of the future;
- They proclaim historical and eschatological visitations to urge people to do God's will now;
- Historical visitations are presented as shadows of what is to come;
- How people stand *now* is how they will stand *then*; what God expects *now* he will expect *then*;
- The prophetic perspective charges all human events with eternal significance.

PROPHECY AND TORAH

The prophets cannot be understood apart from the foundational text of Torah (Prov 29:18; Deut 18:14-15):

- The call to covenantal faithfulness (e.g. Mal 2:10-16);
- The demand for social justice (e.g. Amos 5:21-24);
- The critique of idolatry (e.g. Isa 44:9-20);
- The renewal of creation (e.g. Isa 11:6-9; 65:17-25).



THE PROPHETIC IMAGINATION

The task of prophetic ministry is to nurture, nourish and evoke a consciousness and perception alternative to the consciousness and perception of the dominant culture around us.⁸

Brueggemann powerfully articulates the twofold task of the prophetic ministry which involves both a critique of the prevailing ideology and the fostering of imagination to envisage an alternative reality characterised by *shalom*.

Prophetic criticising

- The prophets provide us with symbols adequate to the massiveness of our experience in contemporary society which evokes numbness and requires a strategy of denial;
- They bring to public expression our fears and terrors;
- They speak concretely about the real deathliness of society.

Prophetic energising

- The prophets provide us with symbols adequate to contradict hopelessness;
- They bring to public expression our hopes and yearnings;
- They speak concretely about the real newness that redefines our situation.

QUESTIONS

1. What are some of the main dangers we face in interpreting prophecy?
2. List some ground rules for a new Christian beginning to study the prophetic scriptures.
3. How should the prophetic perspective influence the way in which we live our everyday lives as the people of God?
4. The popular view is that prophets are 'foretellers of the future', but the Bible is clear that they are 'forthtellers' or 'proclaimers of God's character' and will. Do you think it is important to challenge this popular view? Give your reasons. Is there anyone you know personally, or know about, that you would call a 'prophet'; if so, why? How would you respond to someone who used passages from different parts of the Bible to give detailed predictions about the future?

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⁸ W. Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1978) 13.



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