PRINCIPLES FOR INTERPRETING PROPHECY

I. Introduction to Prophecy

“For many people prophecy is a synonym for prediction. As a result, the prophetic books of the Bible are frequently thought of simply as long lists of predictions concerning future events. Yet when we read the prophetic literature, it is evident that a great portion, if not the greatest portion, of these books, consists of narrative and proclamation. This aspect of prophecy is also evident from the fact that within the Old Testament canon, the books of Joshua through 2 Kings are called the Former Prophets. This further reveals that a prophet was understood more as a forthteller of the divine message than a foreteller of future events. His ministry was often more concerned with proclamation than prediction” (Robert Stein).

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<th>Two Types of Prophecy:</th>
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<td>1. Proclamation of Divine Message</td>
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<td>2. Prediction of Future Events</td>
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At the same time, however, the type of prophecy that is much more difficult to interpret is predictive prophecy. For that reason, this section will deal exclusively with how to interpret those prophetic passages which make predictions about the future.

II. Guidelines for Interpreting Predictive Prophecy

According to one study, 27 percent of the Bible deals with predictions about the future. “It thus is clear the prophecy about the future cannot be passed off lightly if we are to do justice to the Bible as God wished to compose it. Any declaration of the whole counsel of God needs to interact with these prophetic themes on a fairly wide scale, given the fact that approximately one-fourth of the verses in the Bible are concerned with this topic” (Kaiser). The following are suggested principles for how to interpret the predictive prophecy found in Scripture.

A. Determine whether the prophecy is ______________ or ______________.

As the interpreter seeks to discern the divinely intended meaning of a given predictive prophecy, it is essential that he determine whether that prophecy is unconditional or conditional. Failing to recognize the difference can lead to a significant misunderstanding of Scripture.
1. **Unconditional Prophecy**

Unconditional prophecies consist of promises which God unconditionally obligates Himself to fulfill. In other words, “no obligation rests on any mortal, past or present, for their realization. God has bound Himself to see to it that these prophecies are carried out; therefore, there is no shadow of doubt or tentativeness as to whether they will come to fruition or not” (Kaiser). Unconditional prophecies include God’s promise of a dynasty and kingdom for David and his descendants (2 Sam 7:8-16); His promise of a New Covenant for the nation of Israel (Jer 31:31-34); His promise that Jesus will come again (1 Cor 15:23); and His promise of the new heavens and new earth (Rev 21). The interpreter can expect that God will indeed be faithful to fulfill these unconditional promises regardless of what else happens.

2. **Conditional Prophecy**

In contrast, the majority of the predictive prophecies in the Old Testament are conditional. “The most distinctive characteristic of these prophecies is that each one has either an expressed or, more frequently, an implied ‘if’ or ‘unless’ connected to it. Thus, in the case of Jonah there was no explicit promise that if the people repented, they would be spared the calamity that Jonah had threatened would fall on them in forty days. However, only the assumption that Jonah knew that such a reprieve was possible in the event of an unexpected repentance can explain his deep reluctance to proclaim this divine declaration of judgment” (Kaiser).

In fact, the idea that many prophecies of divine judgment are implicitly conditional is specifically identified in Jeremiah 18:7-10, where God said:

> At one moment I might speak concerning a nation or concerning a kingdom to uproot, to pull down, or to destroy it; if that nation against which I have spoken turns from its evil, I will relent concerning the calamity I planned to bring on it. Or at another moment I might speak concerning a nation or concerning a kingdom to build up or to plant it; if it does evil in My sight by not obeying My voice, then I will think better of the good with which I had promised to bless it.

According to Kaiser, there are two basic guidelines that will help the reader recognize a conditional prophecy: “A prophecy is conditional (1) if it refers to an event which is fairly proximate in time and space, and (2) if it is capable of being answered by some act of obedience or repentance on the part of the prophet’s contemporaries.” Recognizing the conditional nature of these
kinds of prophecies will keep the interpreter from questioning whether God was faithful to keep His word.

B. Determine whether the prophecy has already been ________________.

Many predictive prophecies have already been fulfilled, for example: Jeremiah’s prediction of the 70-year captivity in Jeremiah 25:11; Daniel’s prophecy that Belshazzar’s kingdom would be taken over by the Medes and Persians in Daniel 5:25-30; and Jesus’ prediction that He would be crucified and resurrected in Matthew 16:21. Most, however, have not. For example, the vast majority of prophecies in the New Testament are still awaiting a future fulfillment. For this reason, it is essential for the interpreter to determine whether or not the prophecy under consideration has yet to be fulfilled. As he seeks to make this determination, it is important for him to keep in mind that God will always be faithful to keep His promises.

KEY PRINCIPLES:

- If a prophecy is unconditional and unfulfilled, the interpreter should expect a future fulfillment of that divine promise.
- In fulfilling a given prophecy, God can do more than He has promised, but He will never do less.

C. Recognize the use of ________________ in predictive prophecy.

One of the most common characteristics of biblical prophecy is the use of figurative language. For this reason, the interpreter must apply the principles found in Lesson 13 (“The Use of Symbolic Language”) to identify and interpret the use of symbolic language in prophetic passages. In doing so, the interpreter should recognize that symbols usually “fall into one of three categories: (1) symbols that are definitely explained in the context by the writer or an interpreting angel; (2) symbols that are unexplained in the context, but are drawn from an Old Testament background; and (3) symbols that are unexplained and novel in character, but that may be drawn from the contemporary culture, including pagan sources” (Kaiser).

When interpreting prophetic passages, the interpreter should be careful to guard against two common abuses. First, he must not simply assume that the language in a given prophecy is symbolic. As stated below, our starting point in interpreting Scripture is to assume that the language we are reading is literal unless some-thing in the passage compels us to consider a symbolic interpretation. Second, the interpreter must not assume that because some things in a given prophecy are symbolic, then everything in that prophecy is symbolic. Instead, the interpreter should:

- Recognize that there can be both literal and figurative elements in the same passage.
Seek to determine which aspects of the prophecy fall into which category.

D. Recognize the use of “________________” in predictive prophecy.

Sometimes a given prophecy will predict two or more future events and present them in such a way that it appears they will occur simultaneously, but later revelation indicates a significant gap of time separating them. This is often referred to as “telescoping” or “prophetic foreshortening.” It can be likened to seeing two mountain peaks off in the distance—initially they appear to be right next to each other, but a closer look reveals that they are separated by a valley.

- **Isaiah 9:6-7**
  - Verse 6a: The Birth of Christ at His First Coming
  - Verses 6b-7: The Reign of Christ at His Second Coming

- **Isaiah 61:1-2**
  - Verses 1-2a: Fulfilled in Luke 4:16-21 (esp. see v. 21)
  - Verse 2b: The Eschatological Day of Vengeance

- **Jeremiah 29:10-14**
  - Verses 10-11: Israel’s Near Return to the Land (70 years later)
  - Verses 12-14: Israel’s Far Return to the Land (New Covenant)

E. Interpret predictive prophecy with the same ____________-____________ hermeneutic as the rest of Scripture.

“Coming into contact with prophetic literature does not mean that we switch our hermeneutical approach” (Vlach). For this reason, when reading predictive prophecy, the interpreter should proceed with the same grammatical-historical method that he uses with the rest of the Bible. This kind of hermeneutical consistency has specific implications for interpreting prophecy, implications that can be seen by revisiting the five key aspects of Scripture at the foundation of the grammatical-historical method. These five key aspects were identified as:

- The Overall Unity of Scripture
- The Overall Clarity of Scripture
- The Single Meaning of Scripture
- The Contextual Nature of Scripture
- The Human Language of Scripture

A commitment to hermeneutical consistency means that biblical prophecy is viewed in the same overall way as the rest of the Bible and is therefore believed to possess these same five foundational characteristics:

1. **The Overall Unity of Biblical Prophecy**

Because there is only one ultimate author of the entire Bible—the divine author who is God Himself—there is a fundamental unity
that exists not only among the 66 books of Scripture in general, but among the various biblical prophecies in particular. This is sometimes referred to as the “organic unity” of biblical prophecy. As Kaiser explains, the frequent pattern of divine revelation “is to begin by presenting one of the great topics of prophecy in a broad and bold outline, leaving it to subsequent revelations to expand and develop the theme.”

For example, the biblical prophecies about the coming Messiah begin in embryonic form in Genesis 3:15 where God promises to remedy the entrance of sin into the world through a future descendant of the woman. Throughout the remainder of the Old Testament, this initial promise is developed and expanded in such a way that the overall picture of the coming Messiah is filled in and revealed more and more clearly. In this way, Genesis 3:15 can be viewed as the initial strokes of paint on the canvas of biblical prophecy. Then, with each new prophecy, more detail and color is added to the canvas and the picture becomes fuller and clearer.

Throughout this process, the organic unity of prophecy ensures that later revelation will never contradict earlier revelation. In other words, later prophecies may supplement or clarify the meaning found in earlier prophecies by providing more detail or context, but those later prophecies will not change or cancel that original meaning. As John Jelinek writes: “The supposition is that what God first said about what He would do is consistent with what He later said He did and what He says He will do in the future.”

For this reason, as the interpreter makes his way through the progress of revelation, he must look for the unity and development of these key themes in biblical prophecy. In doing so, he must be careful to read the Bible forward (instead of backwards) so that he can see these themes develop and build upon previous revelation as they are expanded by subsequent prophecies.

2. **The Overall Clarity of Biblical Prophecy**

Because the Bible was given to reveal truth rather than conceal it, the interpreter must assume the overall clarity of God’s Word. Often referred to as the perspicuity of Scripture, this means that the divine intention of the Bible was/is basically clear and comprehensible to its original author, its original audience, and its contemporary readers. This is not to say that all parts of Scripture are equally clear or that there are no difficult passages to interpret (2 Pet 3:16), and this does not deny that later revelation provides a fuller picture of the subject addressed in earlier prophecy. But it does mean that the basic meaning of biblical prophecy was
intelligible and could be understood when it was originally revealed.

This has significant implications for the interpreter of biblical prophecy. Put simply, the goal of interpreting prophecy is the same as interpreting the rest of Scripture—to discern the divinely intended meaning that the original author communicated to his original audience. As Gordon Fee writes: “A text cannot mean [now] what it never meant [then]” because “the true meaning of the biblical text for us is what God originally intended it to mean when it was first spoken.”

The reason this is so important is because some interpreters deny the sufficiency of the grammatical-historical method for interpreting OT prophecy. According to this view, the meaning of biblical prophecy in the Old Testament cannot be understood apart from the light of the New Testament, and therefore interpreting a prophetic passage in its original context will not lead to the true, divinely intended meaning of God’s Word. This was the view of George Eldon Ladd, who claimed that “the New Testament frequently interprets Old Testament prophecies in a way not suggested by the Old Testament context.” For this reason, according to Ladd and others, OT prophecies must be reinterpreted in light of NT revelation.

The problem with this approach is that it treats much of the Old Testament as a mystery or riddle that could not be deciphered until new light was provided hundreds of years later. If the Old Testament cannot be understood apart from the light of the New Testament, the original readers of the Old Testament were left in the dark (and even misled!) regarding the true meaning of God’s promises. This is an outright denial of the perspicuity of the Old Testament.

As Walt Kaiser notes, biblical prophecy was not meant to be a secret whose meaning was hidden from God’s people: “It is first and foremost a revelation from God. To argue that God has attached to the language employed in the text a meaning which has not yet been developed is to erect a very strange theory of revelation, not to mention the problem of communication itself. This is equivalent to asserting that revelation is a disclosure and an unveiling, but it is entirely unintelligible. What kind of disclosure of truth is simultaneously a concealing and obfuscation of what has been made plain?”

In addition, there are clear indications in Scripture itself that the Old Testament could be understood apart from the light of the New Testament. For example, Jesus rebuked the two disciples in Luke 24:25 for not believing all that the prophets had written about Him (cf. John 5:39-47). This means that Jesus must have expected
them to be able to read, understand, and believe what the Old Testament taught apart from the light of NT revelation (since that light had not yet been provided). Otherwise, why rebuke them? After all, if the Old Testament could not be understood apart from the New, these disciples could have simply said to Jesus: “How can you say we are foolish and slow to believe the Old Testament if we’re not even able to understand it apart from light which has not yet been given?”

The interpreter of biblical prophecy must affirm the perspicuity of the Old Testament and the sufficiency of the grammatical-historical method for the entire Bible. This means coming to the prophetic passages of Scripture with the assumption that they can be understood accurately in the context in which they were originally revealed.

3. The Single Meaning of Biblical Prophecy

As Walt Kaiser writes: “The best argument for a single-meaning hermeneutic is to be found in observing what happens when it is removed from current conversation or writing. Communication itself is severely handicapped if not made impossible,” for it results in the difficult situation of “everyone communicating, but no one in particular ever receiving (or knowing if he has adequately received) the message.” Therefore, unless a biblical author is clearly engaging in double entendre—a rhetorical device in which two meanings of a word or statement operate at the same time—the interpreter should assume singleness of meaning.

Hermeneutical consistency requires that the interpreter approach biblical prophecy with this same basic assumption. In other words, he should reject the view that a given biblical prophecy can simultaneously possess two meanings, which are clearly distinct from one another and instead come to Scripture in search of its single meaning, the one that was intended by the biblical author in the original context in which he wrote.

At the same time, many interpreters believe that a given prophecy may have a single, determinative meaning and yet multiple fulfillments. The key here is the ability to distinguish between sense and reference. As Paul Feinberg explains, “The sense of a sentence is roughly equivalent to its meaning, and the reference of that sentence to the object or state of affairs referred to.” In this way, “sense” corresponds to meaning and “reference” to fulfillment.

Those who affirm single meaning and multiple fulfillment believe that the sense of OT prophecy “must be determined within its historical and cultural setting, and that sense is determinative for the NT fulfillment” (Feinberg). In other words, “The referent that acts as the fulfillment of an OT prediction must meet the
requirements of the sense of that prediction as determined by application of historical-grammatical hermeneutics” (ibid.). In this way, the meaning is seen to be single and unchanging, and yet there is a near fulfillment and a far fulfillment, both of which have a strict correspondence to the sense/meaning of the original prophecy.

**KEY QUESTION:** Is an affirmation of multiple fulfillments consistent with a commitment to single meaning?

**What About 1 Peter 1:10-12?**

A related question concerns the relationship between the human and divine intent of Scripture and whether or not they are one and the same. Among those who deny the singleness of human/divine intent, many point to 1 Peter 1:10-12:

(10) As to this salvation, the prophets who prophesied of the grace that would come to you made careful searches and inquiries, (11) seeking to know what person or time the Spirit of Christ within them was indicating as He predicted the sufferings of Christ and the glories to follow. (12) It was revealed to them that they were not serving themselves, but you, in these things which now have been announced to you through those who preached the gospel to you by the Holy Spirit sent from heaven—things into which angels long to look.

According to this argument, 1 Peter 1:10-12 indicates that the human authors of Scripture often wrote better than they knew, being ignorant of the meaning of the prophecies that God was communicating through them. For this reason, it is said, the human and divine intent of Scripture cannot be regarded as one and the same.

On the contrary, it appears that the ignorance of the OT prophets has been greatly exaggerated. In fact, as Walt Kaiser observes, 1 Peter 1:10-12 “decisively affirms that the prophets spoke knowingly on five rather precise topics: 1) the Messiah, 2) his sufferings, 3) his glory, 4) the sequence of events (for example, suffering was followed by the Messiah’s glorification), and 5) that the salvation announced in those pre-Christian days was not limited to the prophets’ audiences, but it also included the readers of Peter’s day (v. 12).” In other words, what the prophets unsuccessfully strived to understand was not the meaning of their prophecies about the Messiah but rather the identity of the Messiah and the time of His coming.

To clarify the difference, it is helpful to distinguish between the “sense” and the “referent” of a given word or prophecy. The “sense” of a word is its meaning, the actual concept conveyed by
the word itself. In contrast, the “referent” of a word is the specific thing/person/event that the word refers to in a given context. For example, the sense of the word “man” is an adult male, but its referent will vary according to the specific man being identified or referred to in a given context.

With this distinction in mind, 1 Peter 1:10-12 does not teach that the OT prophets were intensely curious about—and yet often ignorant of—the meaning of what they wrote, for theirs was a search not for the sense of their prophecies but rather for the identity of the referent and the time of His arrival. Ignorance of the latter (the referent) does not imply ignorance of the former (the sense). For example, the prophet’s ignorance of the specific referent of the word “child” (and timing of His arrival) in Isaiah 9:6 does not necessitate that he was ignorant of the sense of the word or the meaning of his prophecy. Again, even though the prophets understood the sense of their prophecies, they did not necessarily have a clear understanding of the specific referents of their prophecies.

To illustrate, suppose a man decides to surprise his family with a trip to the beach after work. So he calls his wife from the office and asks her to tell the children that he has a “surprise” for them when he gets home (his actual word), but he doesn’t tell her what the surprise is. As the messenger to the children, the man’s wife does not possess the full picture of his plans for the future because she doesn’t know the identity of the actual surprise. But when she gathers the children and tells them, “Daddy has a ‘surprise’ for you when he comes home,” she accurately understands the meaning of the message she has delivered, and she has delivered the full message that her husband intended her to deliver.

In this way, (a) her ignorance of the referent of the word “surprise” (a trip to the beach) doesn’t render her ignorant of the sense/meaning of the message she communicated; and (b) her ignorance of the referent of the word “surprise” doesn’t mean that there is a gap between the man’s intention as the ultimate author of the message and her intention as the one who delivered his message. After all, his intended meaning and her intended meaning are one and the same: “Daddy has a surprise for the children when he gets home.” He obviously knows much more about the surprise than she does, but this is the totality of the message that he has chosen to reveal to her—and communicate through her—at least at this point in time. In the same way, even though the divine author of the OT prophecies understood full well the specific referents in those prophecies, the fact that the prophets themselves didn’t necessarily know the identity of these referents does not mean that they didn’t understand their own messages; nor does it mean that there were deeper, secondary
meanings in their words that went beyond their own intention as the human authors of Scripture (cf. Acts 2:30-31). God obviously knew much more about the bigger picture than the prophet, but the prophecy contains the totality of the message He has chosen to reveal to him—and communicate through him—at least at this particular moment in redemptive history. Additional details (and therefore clarity) would come later.

Furthermore, even though the prophets understood the meaning of their prophecies, this does not mean that they always understood all of the yet-to-be-revealed events surrounding the fulfillment of their prophecies. Put another way, a given prophet understood the unique contribution of the piece that he was adding to the puzzle, but not necessarily how his piece fit into the yet-to-be-added-later pieces that would eventually surround his piece and fill out the overall picture. Sometimes this would leave the OT prophet unaware of exactly when and how his prophecy would be fulfilled, but this does not mean that he didn’t understand what he was prophesying. The human intent and divine intent are one and the same.

4. The Contextual Nature of Biblical Prophecy

Because the goal of the interpreter is to determine the meaning that the original author communicated to his original audience, biblical prophecy must be interpreted in the historical, cultural, and literary context in which it was originally written. This context is often neglected or over-looked altogether in favor of identifying some kind of loose connection between the Old Testament prophecy and various redemptive truths set forth in the New Testament.

For example, the interpreter of Ezekiel 36:24-38 must study this prophecy of Israel’s restoration in light of its original context in Ezekiel 36. In the prelude to this prophecy, the Lord rebukes the nation of Israel for defiling the Promised Land through the wickedness of her sin (vv. 16-18). In keeping with the divine warnings of Leviticus 26 and Deuteronomy 28 (also see Lev 18:28), her unfaithfulness to the Mosaic Covenant resulted in the divine judgment of being dispersed from the land and scattered among the nations (v. 19). When the Jews arrived among the nations, the name of Yahweh was profaned because the enemies of Israel concluded that He could not preserve His people in the land He had supposedly given to them (v. 20). This led Yahweh to have a deep concern for His holy name, which had been profaned (v. 21), and this concern is what motivated Him to determine that He would vindicate His reputation among the nations by proving Himself holy in their sight (vv. 22-23). The action that God will take to prove Himself holy and vindicate His name among the nations is then described in Ezekiel 36:24-38. Only when the
prophecy is interpreted in this context will it be understood accurately.

In contrast, some interpreters treat Ezekiel 36:24-38 as a broad description of God’s work of salvation in His people in general, apart from any understanding of how it fits into the context of Ezekiel 36 and Yahweh’s desire to vindicate His reputation among the nations. In this approach, the exegesis of this prophecy yields biblically derived information on the divine gifts of forgiveness, regeneration, and the indwelling Holy Spirit, but a clear understanding of exactly how, when, and in whom this prophecy will be fulfilled is entirely absent. Biblical prophecy must be interpreted carefully in its original context just like the rest of Scripture.

5. The Human Language of Biblical Prophecy

In His Word, God chose to reveal truth through existing human languages. In other words, “Each biblical writing—that is, each word, sentence, and book—was recorded in a written language and followed normal, grammatical meanings, including figurative language” (Zuck). As Zuck writes: “Nowhere does Scripture indicate that when we come to prophetic portions of Scripture we should ignore the normal sense of the words and overlook the meanings of words and sentences. The norms of grammatical interpretation should be applied to prophetic as well as nonprophetic literature.”

In order to determine the divinely intended meaning of biblical prophecy, then, the interpreter must be careful to analyze the grammar and determine the meaning of words according to their normal grammatical and lexical uses at the time that the passage was written. Put simply, this consists of grammatical and lexical analysis discussed above in lessons 5 and 6. These steps are at the heart of the grammatical-historical approach to Scripture and must not be neglected in the process of exegeting predictive prophecy.

The Use of the OT in the NT

Some interpreters point to the use of the Old Testament in the New Testament as reason to reject principles such as the perspicuity and single meaning of OT prophecy. Furthermore, they see the New Testament writers’ citations of the Old Testament as evidence that prophetic passages should be approached differently from other genres of Scripture. For this reason—and because it is such a significant issue in its own rite—lesson 15 below consists of an introductory discussion of the use of the Old Testament in the New Testament.
RESOURCES FOR FURTHER STUDY:
“Interpreting Prophecy” in Zuck, Basic Bible Interpretation, 227-49.
“The Prophets: Enforcing the Covenant in Israel, 181-204.
“The Interpretation of Prophecy” in Ramm, Protestant Biblical Interpretation, 241-75.

*If interested, I could also recommend articles on prophecy, dispensationalism, covenants, or other related topics to understand.

For Homework:
You could consider passages such as Micah 6:6-8, Jeremiah 7:1-7, and/or Jeremiah 31:10-14. Walk through the following steps:

1. Grasp the text in “their town.” What did it mean to the original audience? Make as many observations as you can (you will never exhaust them!). You could mark up your observations on a photocopy of the text. Be sure you understand all the words. Study the background & identify all figures of speech. Identify the literary context & the historical/cultural context. When and where does this prophecy occur? (use a Bible dictionary, encyclopedia, and/or commentary. What does the surrounding context discuss?
2. What are the differences between the biblical audience and us?
3. What is the theological principle in this text?
4. Does the NT teaching clarify or quantify this principle? If so, how?
5. How should individual Christians today apply the theological principle in their lives? What are the implications of the text?