

OUTLINE STUDIES IN THE BOOKS OF THE OLD TESTAMENT

by

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CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

PROPHECY

The subject of prophecy is a vast and important one. It occupies a most prominent place in the Bible. It is found in almost every portion of the Word of God. Sixteen books (i. e., if we reckon Lamentations as a part of Jeremiah) of the Old Testament are devoted to it, and one of the New, Revelation.

The moral instruction it contains, the momentous events it announces, the revelation of the divine character and of the nature, establishment, and purpose of the kingdom of God, which it affords, all combine to invest it with the profoundest interest. Before entering upon a study of the prophetic books, some observations on the general subject seem to be required.

Happily the Bible itself furnishes us an authoritative definition of the office and function of the prophet.

In Exodus 7:1, we are told “**the Lord said unto Moses, See, I have made thee a god to Pharaoh; and Aaron, thy brother, shall be thy prophet.**”

No statement could be clearer than this. By divine appointment Moses was to be in the place of God to Pharaoh, and Aaron was to act as the prophet of Moses, receiving from him the message and delivering it to the king.

This is further illustrated in Exodus 4:15, 16, where Moses was directed to “**speak**” to Aaron, “**and put words into his mouth,**” the Lord promising at the same time to be with the mouths of both His servants and to teach them what they should do. Furthermore, Aaron was to be Moses’ spokesman unto the people, i. e., he was to act the part of the prophet for Moses, and Moses was to be to him instead of God.

Here, then, we have the Scriptural definition of the prophet.

- He was one who received a message from God and delivered it to those for whom it was intended.
- He was God’s “spokesman” and “mouth,” the bearer and proclaimer of the Lord’s will.

- He was “the man of God;” his message the word of God. Through him God spake, Hebrews 1:1.

Prophecy sprang from man’s exigencies. It had its origin in man’s sore need; its birth was in the day of his sin and apostasy. The first great predictive promise, that which stands at the head of all the rest and leads the long procession, was given after the fall, and because of the fall, Genesis 3:15. Mercy and grace prompted it, but the ruin wrought by sin was its occasion.

It was mainly in consequence of Israel’s rejection of God as their glorious King, and their determination to have a king from among themselves and like themselves that Samuel and the prophets that follow after came into such prominence.

It was because of the apostasy of the chosen people and the tremendous afflictions which befell them on account of it that the ministries of Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Daniel assumed such vast importance, and became so significant in all succeeding history. Prophecy, therefore, implies failure. Had there been no sin, prophecy would probably have never been given, because not needed.

The apostle Peter exhorts believers to take heed to the word of prophecy more confirmed **“as unto a light that shineth in a dark place, until the day dawn and the daystar arise in your hearts,”** II Peter 1:19.

“A lamp shining in a dark place” is the inspired description of the nature and object of prophecy.

- It was when Israel was apostatizing from God that the prophets appeared, uttered their solemn warnings and made their passionate appeals.
- It was when Jesus knew that the nation had determined on His rejection and murder that He announced the overthrow of the temple, the dismemberment and dispersion of the chosen people.
- It was when the Spirit of God had detected the germs of declension and apostasy in the professing Christian church that He revealed the guilt, tribulation, and doom of the unfaithful body.

One great aim of prophecy was to testify against the defections and corruptions of the prophet’s own times, and to arrest and correct them.

Thus, Elijah, Elisha, Hosea, Amos and others bore a faithful witness against the increasing wickedness of the kings and people of Israel (the northern kingdom), and their tone deepened in intensity and earnestness in proportion as the evils grew and the end drew on.

So, too, the prophets of Judah cried aloud and spared not in their efforts to check and turn back the tide of evil, but in vain; and Jeremiah sings at length the mournful dirge that tells of Judah’s fall. Accordingly, the prophet’s message often originated from the circumstances and the exigencies of his own times, and often likewise was addressed to the men of his own generation. But this is not an invariable rule. There is no traceable connection between the temporal conditions of Micah and the prediction of the birthplace of Messiah, Micah 5:2.

Nor is it possible to find any relation between the circumstances in the life of the writer of Psalm twenty-two and the unique experiences therein detailed. The same remark holds in the instances of the covenant and promises made to Abraham, Genesis 15:22. The seven great prophetic parables of Matthew 13, properly speaking, have no “historical setting,” as the pet phrase runs. It is a very serious mistake to tie up the messages of the prophets to their own times, and attempt to exhaust their contents in their application to the prophet’s contemporaries.

The prophets were predictors of future events.

They were the deliverers of the divine communications not only as to the moral state of the men of the prophet’s own generation, but more especially as to God’s purposes in the future. Often, in fact almost invariably, the messages of the prophets to the people of their own day are intermingled with announcements of events to be realized in the distant future. Such, for example, are many of the predictions of Isaiah, of almost all of Daniel, of our Lord’s Olivet prophecy, Matthew 24, 25, and the Apocalypse of John.

Each prophet had both a distinct call to the office, and a message to deliver. Both were from God. No man could assume it, self-appointed; much less could he originate his message. For Moses, see Exodus 3:2; Samuel, I Samuel 3:10; Isaiah 6:8; Jeremiah 1:5; Ezekiel 2:4; Daniel 2:19-23, etc.

The outline of the general subject may be summarized as follows:

1. Prophecy is a miracle of knowledge.

That is, it is an accurate foreseeing and foretelling of future events so that men may perceive that human sagacity, political forecasting, induction by the reason, and intuition, could by no possibility of exertion or premeditation ever predict. Biblical prophecy is not an inference from existing data—nor a deduction. Much less is it a generalization from known facts or shrewd guessing. As it is from God who knows the end from the beginning it can only be a divine revelation.

A true prophecy is authenticated by its fulfillment, and remains always a monument of its own origin and truth. Deuteronomy 13:1-3; 18:20-22; Jeremiah 28:1-9.

2. It must have been uttered as a prophecy from the beginning.

A conjecture, or a happy coincidence, is excluded. An inspired prediction is intentionally given as such, because God, its Author, knows precisely what the event predicted shall be, and He has the power and wisdom to secure its accomplishment.

3. It must have a definite meaning, and inculcate a moral truth.

All prophecy is a revelation of the perfections and purposes of God.

4. It must be worthy of God.

The puerilities and silliness so often associated with soothsaying can have no place in predictions which come from God.

5. While it is perspicuous, it is not so detailed and minute as to suggest to human agents ways and methods of working out its accomplishment.

In the study of prophecy it should be borne in mind that it is marked by a certain progress. This is true indeed of the whole Bible. It is a book of growth. The “**sundry times and divers manners**” of Hebrews 1:1, indicates this fact. Gradually, by piecemeal as we might say, God gave forth His communications to the people through His servants, the prophets.

The progress referred to is particularly noticeable in the predictions relating to the Messiah, the promised Deliverer. At first His coming is made public and promiscuous. He might be born anywhere, He might spring from any family of earth. The only thing certain was that He was to be a descendant of Eve, the mother of us all. But ere long a restricting process began which limited the promise and made it more definite and precise.

It is announced that He shall be:

- Of the seed of Abraham, Genesis 17:7; 22:18;
- That He shall be of the tribe of Judah, Genesis 49:10;
- Of the house of David, II Samuel 7:14-16;
- The Son of a Virgin, Isaiah 7:14;
- Born at Bethlehem, Micah 5:2;
- And in the sixty-ninth week of Daniel’s mystic seventy, Daniel 9:24-26.

As the majestic portrait of the coming Messiah grows, new features are added to it by the prophetic hand.

- He is to be a holy sin-bearer,
- He is to be a silent sufferer,
- He is to be a slaughtered Lamb.
- The sword is to awake against Him,
- He is to know the bitterness of death and the grave.
- And yet He is to be the conqueror of death, the vanquisher of the grave.

From first to last, from the prophetic Psalms to Isaiah and Daniel and Malachi, there is progress, movement, growth.

We should carefully discriminate between prophecy and what in some sort resembles it and with what it has sometimes been confounded, viz., divination. According to the Scripture, prophecy does not spring from any natural parts whatsoever, or from any powers of the human spirit.

Its origin is always traced to the supernatural working of the Spirit of God on the spirit of the prophet. The prophets disclaim any part in the origination of their messages. Even the words in which the message is conveyed they ascribe to God.

Their uniform and authoritative formula is, **“The word of the Lord came unto me,” “Thus saith the Lord.”**

The language of the apostle Peter is final on the subject: **“For the prophecy came not in old time by the will of man: but holy men of God spake as they were moved by the Holy Ghost,”** II Peter 1:21, cf. I Peter 1:10, 11; Luke 1:70, etc.

Soothsaying can claim no such exalted origin. Mark the difference between the two.

- Prophecy from its nature and design cannot give predictions on all kinds of subjects and things. Divination attempts precisely to do this.
- Prophecy announces nothing else than events and relations which stand in organic and internal connection with the plan of redemption. Divination undertakes to reveal the future of persons and things without any reference to the divine government or God’s purposes of grace.
- Prophecy has to do with the course and development of God’s kingdom in the world. Divination is essentially a puerile kind of fortune-telling.
- Prophecy is the product of the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. Divination rests upon an imaginary intercourse with an extra-mundane spirit.
- The prophet spoke the words of the Lord, the words which the Lord had put into his mouth, Jeremiah 1:9; Ezekiel 2, 7. The soothsayer and false prophet spoke out of their own hearts, Jeremiah 14:14; 23:16.
- The former brought objective truth, the latter a subjective presentiment.
- The one received his message from without, from beyond the boundaries of his own intelligence. The other evoked his oracle from the depths of his own heart.
- The prophets had for the object and center of all their communications the Lord Jesus Christ. Divination knows nothing of Christ, cares nothing for Him.

Besides, there is a remarkable harmony and correspondence between the claim of the prophets to be the spokesmen of God and their messages. There is no disparity between them. Their claim and their message square with each other. In all the range of literature there is nothing next to or like this to be found. In this respect the prophecy of Scripture stands without a parallel in the history of the world.

We are not left to conjecture how the divine communications were made to the prophets. In Numbers 12, 6-8, the Lord said to Moses, Aaron, and Miriam that He would make Himself known to a prophet in a vision or a dream; but to Moses His servant He would **“speak mouth to mouth.”** In these three ways God made known His will to men. That He spoke to men by an audible voice, giving them a verbal message cannot be doubted, Numbers 12, 4, 8; Deuteronomy 34:10; I Samuel 3; Ezekiel 2, etc. Through dreams likewise the will of God was revealed. Joseph in Egypt, Joseph the husband of Mary, Nebuchadnezzar and others had communications from God in this way. Most of the contents of the prophetic Scriptures were given through visions vouchsafed the prophets.

In the dream and vision the mental state of the prophet is conjectured by Myrick to have been as follows:

- (1) The bodily senses were closed to external objects as in deep sleep.
- (2) The reflective and discursive faculty was still and inactive.
- (3) The spiritual faculty (the *pneuma*) was awakened to the highest state of energy.

The spirit of the prophet became, as it were, an ear and an eye, aroused and quickened as he was by the Spirit of God, so that he could hear the voice of the Lord and see the future as it was unfolded to him by the revealing Mind.

Anciently the name Seer was given the prophet (I Samuel 9:9), because preeminently:

- He was one who saw, who was endowed with the seeing faculty in the highest degree.
- He possessed a preternatural sight, and insight;
- He had power given him to look into the invisible world.

That the prophets did not always understand the messages which were communicated to them is evident from I Peter 1:10-12. After receiving the messages they themselves diligently studied them. In both Daniel and the Apocalypse of John there is unmistakable evidence of this fact, Daniel 7:28; 8:15-27; 10:7-15; Revelation 1:17; 7:13, 14; 17:6.

It follows of necessary consequence that the very words must have been given the prophets by the Lord, for they were incompetent to put into intelligible and accurate language that which they themselves did not understand.

1. *The vividness of the visions.*

The prophets beheld the future as if it were present. In fact, the future was brought before them and became an actual reality by the series of object-visions or pictures in which it was embodied visibly before them. "They saw the future in space rather than in time; the whole, therefore, appears foreshortened and perspective rather than actual distance is regarded." Hence they often speak of the future as if it were past. There is a "prophetic perfect" tense in the language of prophecy. Psalms 22:49, Isaiah 53, and much of Daniel and Revelation are examples of this use of language. Very graphic are the visions of the prophets. The picture of the event foretold stands out sharply defined, clear, unmistakable in its outlines, massiveness and action.

2. *Symbolism. Prophecy is full of symbols.*

They correspond to the types of the Mosaic ritual; in both the predominant idea is the pictorial representation of things to come. In Daniel and John the future is portrayed by a series of gorgeous pictures. Symbols, it should be remembered, have a language of their own as definite as any form of speech. They are addressed to the eye, while the prophetic discourse is for the ear.

Some of the uses of prophecy may be briefly summarized:

1. It substantiates the claims and the mission of the prophet.
2. It is an enduring witness to the person, character and work of the Lord Jesus Christ.
3. It is a chief pillar of Christianity as a divine system.
4. It is an unimpeachable evidence of the plenary inspiration of the Bible.
5. It is the lamp by the light of which the believer is to walk through the darkness of this world.

Some hints touching the study and interpretation of prophecy may not be out of place. Of course, in a paper such as this only the briefest suggestions are given.

1. Ascertain the relation of the prophecy to the prophet himself and to the times in which he lived. Often the historical occasion of the divine communication serves to throw much light on its meaning and aim. But this is only partially true. There are many predictions of which the "historical setting," even if it were discoverable, affords no help.

2. Collect together all that God the Holy Spirit has been pleased to reveal on any subject, and study and compare.

3. Distinguish the form from the truth embodied in it. That is, distinguish figures from what is represented by them. Whatever images the prophet may use the subject of prophecy is never a figure. Back of the picture and behind the image in which the future is revealed lies the reality, the mighty fact which the Spirit of God has been pleased to reveal.

4. Mark the principles of interpretation sanctioned by the New Testament. We there find the true method of prophetic interpretation, viz., that the Bible is an organic unity, that Christ is the center and object of all the divine counsels and purposes, that Israel is not exactly the church of God of our dispensation, and that there is a great and blessed future both for Israel and for the earth itself. If one reverently and earnestly gives himself to the study of prophetic interpretation as furnished by the inspired writers of the New Testament he will discover the divinely sanctioned rule for all the Bible.

5. A common maxim is that history is the expounder of prophecy; that we must await its fulfillment to understand it. The view is only partially correct, is indeed very inadequate. It confounds the interpretation with the confirmation. A prediction is sometimes as difficult to understand after its accomplishment as before. If prophecy can be understood only when it has been fulfilled, then it is practically useless until it has become history. How, then, can it be a lamp shining in a dark place for our guidance? Prophecy is intended for all God's people. But all cannot know the world's history: hence history is not its final interpreter.

6. The Spirit of God is the infallible interpreter of prophecy, as He is of all Scripture.

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