

I. **HOW TO INTERPRET PROPHECY AND THE OT PROPHETS.**

A. Generally, in the narrative books of the OT we hear about prophets and very little from prophets. In the prophetic books, however, we hear from God via the prophets and very little about the prophets themselves.

B. **The Function of the Prophets.**

1. The prophets were covenant enforcement mediators.

Moses was the mediator for God's Law when God first announced it, and thus a paradigm (model) for the prophets. The prophets are God's mediators, or spokespersons, for the covenant. Through the prophets God reminds the people in the generations after Moses that if the Law is kept, blessings will result; but if not, punishment will ensue.

The Law contains certain categories of corporate blessings for covenant faithfulness:

- a. Life.
- b. Health.
- c. Prosperity.
- d. Agricultural abundance.
- e. Respect and safety.

Regarding the curses, they may be grouped under ten headings:

- a. Death.
- b. Disease.
- c. Drought.
- d. Dearth.
- e. Danger.
- f. Destruction.
- g. Defeat.
- h. Deportation.
- i. Destitution.
- j. Disgrace.

2. The prophets' message was not their own, but God's.

As one reads the prophets they will preface, or conclude, or regularly punctuate their oracles with reminders like, "Thus says the Lord" or "Says the Lord." A majority of the time, in fact, the prophetic message is relayed directly as received from the Lord, in the first person, so that God speaks of Himself as "I" or "Me."

The prophets were, on their own, neither radical social reformers nor innovative religious thinkers. The social reform and religious thought which God wished to impart to the people had already been revealed in the Law.

What we read in the prophetic books is not merely God's Word as the prophet saw it, but God's Word as God wished the prophet to present it. The prophet does not act or speak independently (2Pet. 1:20,21).

*But know this first of all, that no prophecy of Scripture is a matter of one's own interpretation, 21 for no prophecy was ever made by an act of human will, but men moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God.*

3. The prophet's message is unoriginal.

Gaining people's attention may involve rephrasing and restructuring something that they have already heard many times, so that it has a certain kind of "newness." But that is not at all the same as actually initiating any new message or altering the old message.

C. **The Historical Context.**

1. It is interesting to note that the 16 prophetic books of the OT come from a rather narrow band in the whole panorama of Israelite history i.e., about 760-460BC. Those years were characterized by three things:

- a. Unprecedented political, military, economic, and social upheaval.
- b. An enormous level of religious unfaithfulness and disregard for the original Mosaic covenant.
- c. Shifts in populations and national boundaries.

2. The prophets speak in large measure directly to these events. Unless you know these events and other within this era too numerous to mention here, you probably will not be able to follow very well what the prophets are saying. God spoke in history about history. To understand His Word we must know something of that history.

D. **Forms of Prophetic Utterance.**

1. Forth-telling.

The vast majority of the prophet's writing (or speaking) was to the people of his generation. The message focused on the impending doom or salvation of those who heard the message.

2. Foretelling.

This deals with the statements made about the near future or about the Messiah to come. This small portion of the prophets' preaching usually gets the most attention from Christians.

3. The lawsuit.

God is portrayed imaginatively as the plaintiff, prosecuting attorney, judge, and bailiff in a court case against the defendant, Israel. The full lawsuit contains a summons, a charge, evidence and a verdict, though these elements may sometimes be implied rather than explicit. This special literary form helps get the special message across.

- a. Court is convened (Isa. 3:13-14).

The LORD arises to contend,  
And stands to judge the people.

**14** The LORD enters into judgment with the elders and princes of His people,  
"It is you who have devoured the vineyard;  
The plunder of the poor is in your houses.

- b. The indictment or accusation (Isa. 3:14b-16).

"It is you who have devoured the vineyard;  
The plunder of the poor is in your houses.

**15** "What do you mean by crushing My people  
And grinding the face of the poor?"  
Declares the Lord GOD of hosts.

**16** Moreover, the LORD said, "Because the daughters of Zion are proud  
And walk with heads held high and seductive eyes,  
And go along with mincing steps  
And tinkle the bangles on their feet,

- c. Found guilty so sentence is announced (Isa. 3:17-26).

**17** Therefore the Lord will afflict the scalp of the daughters of Zion with scabs,  
And the LORD will make their foreheads bare."

**18** In that day the Lord will take away the beauty of *their* anklets, headbands, crescent ornaments,  
**19** dangling earrings, bracelets, veils, **20** headdresses, ankle chains, sashes, perfume boxes,  
amulets,

**21** finger rings, nose rings, **22** festal robes, outer tunics, cloaks, money purses, **23** hand mirrors,  
undergarments, turbans and veils.

**24** Now it will come about that instead of sweet perfume there will be putrefaction;  
Instead of a belt, a rope;  
Instead of well-set hair, a plucked-out scalp;  
Instead of fine clothes, a donning of sackcloth;  
And branding instead of beauty.

**25** Your men will fall by the sword  
And your mighty ones in battle.

**26** And her gates will lament and mourn,  
And deserted she will sit on the ground.

4. The woe.

“Woe” was the word ancient Israelites cried out when facing disaster or death, or when they mourned at a funeral (Hab. 2:6-8).

“Will not all of these take up a taunt-song against him,  
Even mockery *and* insinuations against him  
And say, ‘Woe to him who increases what is not his--  
For how long--  
And makes himself rich with loans?’

7 “Will not your creditors rise up suddenly,  
And those who collect from you awaken?  
Indeed, you will become plunder for them.

8 “Because you have looted many nations,  
All the remainder of the peoples will loot you--  
Because of human bloodshed and violence done to the land,  
To the town and all its inhabitants.

Woe oracles contain, either explicitly or implicitly, three unique elements:

- a. An announcement of distress (usually containing the word “woe”).
- b. The reason for the distress.
- c. A prediction of doom.

5. The promise.

This is the “salvation oracle.” It is easily recognized when these three things are present:

- a. A reference to the future.
- b. A mention of radical change.
- c. A mention of blessing.

Such an oracle is found in Amos 9:11-15.

“In that day I will raise up the fallen booth of David,  
And wall up its breaches;  
I will also raise up its ruins  
And rebuild it as in the days of old;

12 That they may possess the remnant of Edom  
And all the nations who are called by My name,”  
Declares the LORD who does this.

13 “Behold, days are coming,” declares the LORD,  
“When the plowman will overtake the reaper  
And the treader of grapes him who sows seed;  
When the mountains will drip sweet wine  
And all the hills will be dissolved.

14 “Also I will restore the captivity of My people Israel,  
And they will rebuild the ruined cities and live *in them*;  
They will also plant vineyards and drink their wine,  
And make gardens and eat their fruit.

15 “I will also plant them on their land,  
And they will not again be rooted out from their land  
Which I have given them,”  
Says the LORD your God.

E. **Conclusion.**

When one comes to the actual study or exegetically-informed reading of the prophetic books, the first thing one must learn to do is to THINK ORACLES (as one must learn to think paragraphs in the Epistles). This is not always an easy task, but to know the difficulty and the need to do this is the beginning of some exciting discovery.