

He Gave Us Prophets

LESSON
ONE

ESSENTIAL
HERMENEUTICAL
PERSPECTIVES



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Lesson One

Essential Hermeneutical Perspectives

INTRODUCTION

I have a friend who once told me, “Richard, if you want a big church, all you have to do is throw a Bible prophecy conference and tell everyone that Jesus is coming back very soon.” And as I take a look at Christian bookstores and Christian television, I’m convinced he’s right. Lots of people are excited about prophecy because they’re convinced that the prophets of old tell them that Jesus is coming back very soon.

Most Christians pay little attention to Old Testament prophecy, but when they do their thoughts run immediately to things like the second coming of Christ and other end-of-the-world events. Christian leaders of many different denominations encourage people to look for these themes on every page of the prophetic writings. Although our minds almost naturally run to these themes, in these lessons we’re going to take a much more sober approach to Old Testament prophecy — the approach that the prophets themselves took. And as we do, we’ll discover that the prophets had much, much more to say than we can possibly imagine.

We have entitled this lesson “Essential Hermeneutical Perspectives” because we’ll identify the hermeneutical or interpretative considerations which we must all grasp if we’re going to handle biblical prophecy responsibly. This opening lesson will divide into four parts: our confusion about Old Testament prophecy, and then we’ll look at three topics that will help us overcome this confusion — the nature of a prophet’s experience, the importance of finding the original meaning, and finally, New Testament perspectives on Old Testament prophecy. Let’s take a look first at our confusion.

OUR CONFUSION

Have you ever noticed how most Christians know some parts of the Bible better than they know others? In the Old Testament, the stories of the Pentateuch are very familiar. Motivated Bible readers know Joshua and Judges, and a few believers even understand a lot about books like Samuel and Kings and Chronicles. But as soon as someone asks, “What is Isaiah about?” or “How about that Zephaniah?” “Isn’t Haggai a thrilling book?,” well, we’re left dumbfounded because we know so little about these books. Even pastors and other Christian teachers tend to avoid careful explanations about Old Testament prophets because they’re so confused about this part of the Bible.

As we begin this study of Old Testament prophecy, it’s important that we start with a look at our confusion. We’ll ask two basic questions: what are the sources of our confusion, and what are some of the results of this confusion? Let’s begin with a look at the sources of confusion that so many of us feel about Old Testament prophecy.

SOURCES OF CONFUSION

There are at least two things that cause many Christians to have problems with this part of Scripture. First, the prophetic books themselves, and second, disharmony in the church.

Prophetic Books

Let's face it, the books of prophecy contained in Scripture are probably the most difficult parts of the Bible to grasp. Most Christians have a hard time even pronouncing the names of some prophets, much less understanding what they said. We're frequently perplexed by the contents of their books. They seem disjointed; one verse doesn't seem to lead to the next. And prophets seem to talk in riddles and in puzzles, and sometimes their words just don't make sense to us at all.

And if this weren't enough, we also don't know much about the historical events of this period of the Bible. The kings, the nations, the wars and other events are so complex that we have a hard time keeping our bearings. When most Christians read Old Testament prophets, they feel as if they've entered into a very strange, foreign land. The street signs don't make sense. The customs are bizarre. And we walk around bewildered because of the difficulties that the prophetic books themselves present.

The Church

There's a second major source of our confusion: the church. The Christian church has wonderful harmony of teaching in so many areas. But, when it comes to interpreting Old Testament prophecy, there is hardly any harmony at all, only disagreement. You've heard the debates — what are you? A premillennial dispensationalist? Do you believe in pre-tribulation rapture or mid-tribulation rapture or post-tribulation rapture? How about becoming a postmillennialist or a historical premillennialist? Or are you a pessimistic or optimistic amillennialist? We go to one denomination and hear that everyone else is wrong. Then we go to another group and hear just the opposite. Although evangelicals agree on the essentials of the faith, there is hardly any agreement among us when it comes to prophecy. The church has been so divided about the interpretation of the prophets that it is difficult for us to come to these texts with much confidence at all.

RESULTS OF CONFUSION

This deep confusion we feel has led to some regrettable results. I can think of at least two major results from the confusion that we have over of this part of the Bible: victimization and apathy.

Victimization

Victimization happens all around us. There's so much disagreement and confusion that so-called "prophecy experts" rise to bring order to the confusion. They do this by going around and teaching their opinions, as if they were absolutely certain.

Several examples of victimization like this come to my mind. In recent decades, countless books and teachers have said that the establishment of Israel in 1948 marked the last generation before Christ's return. It used to be taught widely that Christ had to return within one forty-year generation after 1948 — "Only one generation after Israel returns to the land, the Bible says forty years, and Christ will come back for his church."

Well, forty years have passed and nothing happened. We might have hoped that the passing of 1988 would have stopped the speculations, but it hasn't. As the years have passed by, prophecy experts have turned their attention elsewhere. Now they claim that the year 2000 brings us to the threshold of the end of time. Expectations are feverish again. Even magazines and tabloids tell us that apocalypse is just around the corner; all the signs are pointing to the end. They tell us that every current event, every war, every earthquake, every economic trouble, shows us that Old Testament prophecies about the return of Christ are about to be fulfilled. And of course, the practical application of many of these prophecy conferences is this: "Buy my books." "Give money to my ministry." Sadly, Christians are easily victimized by these so-called "experts." Thousands of us bounce from one interpretation to another just because we don't know how to understand prophets for ourselves.

Apathy

Victimization is just one result of our confusion about Old Testament prophecy. There is another result that we can see as well. Many times we become apathetic about understanding this part of the Bible. Many Christians seem to go through phases in their approach to prophecy. At first, they begin with a lot of enthusiasm. They hear someone teach and they find a lot of excitement in going to conferences and reading books about prophets. But the next thing you know, these believers find themselves in crisis, because their teachers have told them things that just don't turn out to be true. And in many cases, these same Christians end up with great apathy. They give up on trying to understand this part of the Bible.

That's what happened to me when I was in high school. I was a brand new Christian and all my teachers told me, "Richard, Jesus is coming back very soon." So, I even gave up on the idea of going to college. Happily, I discovered they were wrong very quickly, and I went on and made a life for myself. But I became very apathetic about Old Testament prophecy. I thought to myself, "I can't understand this part of the Bible. I just have to deal with other parts that I can understand." And I have to tell you, everywhere I go, I see Christians who are apathetic about Old Testament prophecy.

I'm afraid that many believers today are apathetic about Old Testament prophecy. They give up on trying to understand this part of the Bible because they're tired of

disappointment and they're tired of being victimized. I can't tell you how many pastors I've heard say, "Don't worry about prophecy. You'll never understand it anyway." So, we just forget about this part of the Bible.

Well, it's time to change this situation. We need to learn about Old Testament prophecy so that we will not be victimized "by every wind of doctrine." But we must also learn about prophecy so we can avoid apathy. God did not include prophecy in the Bible so that we would ignore it. He gave us this part of Scripture so that we could benefit from it in countless ways, and we should not be satisfied to remain ignorant or confused about prophecy.

I think we all recognize these problems with Old Testament prophecies, but now we have to ask another question. What kinds of things do we need to understand in order to avoid these problems, in order to increase our knowledge and understanding of Old Testament prophecies? There are at least three major topics that we must explore in order to avoid victimization and apathy. We need to learn about the nature of a prophet's experience, and we must also reaffirm the importance of the original meaning of prophecies. And we need to gain a better understanding of how the New Testament handled Old Testament prophecies. These three topics are so important that we'll deal with them throughout these lessons. At this point, we will simply introduce some preliminary thoughts.

PROPHET'S EXPERIENCE

Let's take a look first at the experience of an Old Testament prophet. If we ever hope to handle Old Testament prophecy more responsibly, we must look carefully at the experience of prophets. What happened to these messengers from God? What did they experience as they announced God's Word? As I have read and listened to people talking about prophets, at least three misconceptions about their experiences have come to the foreground. Many Christians misunderstand the mental state of prophets. We also misunderstand the ways in which God inspired the words of prophets. And we often don't have the right idea about the comprehension of Old Testament prophets, what they understood about their words.

MENTAL STATE

In the first place, many students of Scripture act as if the prophets were practically out of their minds when they received their prophecies. The prophets were so overwhelmed by the Spirit of God that they lost their senses. They went into a state of feverish delirium much like Canaanite prophets of Baal and other religions of the ancient and modern world.

Now as widespread as this outlook on prophets may be, it does not match up with the evidence of Scripture. I think we can be sure there were times when Old Testament prophets were astonished by what they saw and heard from God. We can only imagine

what state of mind Ezekiel must have been in when in chapter 8, the Spirit of God picked him up by his hair and carried him hundreds of miles from Babylon to the temple in Jerusalem. But even in this condition, Ezekiel was not completely beside himself. He didn't lose his mind. Instead, when we read this portion of the book of Ezekiel, we find that he was able to interact reasonably with God. Even in dramatic situations Old Testament prophets remained alert and aware as God revealed his Word to them.

INSPIRATION

A second widespread misconception of the prophet's experience has to do with the ways in which they were inspired by God.

Mechanical Inspiration

Unfortunately, many Christians approach Old Testament prophets as if they were mechanically inspired. We treat the prophets as if they were mere dictation machines. When Isaiah spoke, he merely allowed God to move his lips. When Amos preached, God forced every word through his mouth. We know better than to think this way about other parts of the Bible, but when it comes to Old Testament prophets, we frequently treat them as if they were passive instruments of revelation, mere mechanical mouthpieces of God.

Organic Inspiration

In contrast with this popular way of looking at inspiration, in these lessons we'll operate with a view called "organic inspiration." We believe that the Holy Spirit inspired the writings of prophets so that they have no errors. But at the same time, we know that when God inspired the writing of Scripture he used the personalities and the thoughts and the outlooks of human writers. In the New Testament we know this is true. Paul's epistles reflect his personality and his background. And we also recognize that the differences among the four gospels result primarily from differences in the human writers' intentions and goals. In much the same way, God used the personalities, the experiences, and the intentions of prophets as he inspired them. If we hope to understand Old Testament prophecy, we must reject a mechanical understanding of their experience and begin to look for the ways God inspired them as full, thinking human beings.

COMPREHENSION

In line with our other misconceptions of prophets' experiences, we often don't have a very good idea of how much prophets understood their words. In fact, most Christians act as if the prophets were ignorant, or unable to understand what they were saying. For instance, if someone had stopped Amos and asked him, "What do you mean

by what you're saying?" most Christians think that Amos would have to have responded this way: "I don't know what I'm saying; I just say what God tells me to say."

Well, in contrast with this misconception, the Bible teaches that prophets had understanding. They understood much of what they said. For instance, in Daniel 12:8, Daniel did confess,

I heard but I could not understand (Daniel 12:8, NRSV).

But we have to be careful to discern what Daniel meant. He explained himself as he continued to speak to the Lord,

My Lord, what [will] be the outcome of these things? (Daniel 12:8, NRSV).

You see, Daniel understood what he heard and written; he knew the vocabulary; he knew the grammar — these were his words, after all. But, he did not understand everything. He admitted not knowing precisely how the prophecy would be fulfilled.

In much the same way, 1 Peter 1:11 tells us that Old Testament prophets understood, but they did not understand all that they had said. There, Peter says the prophets of old tried

... to find out the time and circumstances to which the Spirit of Christ in them was pointing (1 Peter 1:11).

In other words, Peter said that Old Testament prophets remained ignorant of the details of timing and circumstances, but he does not suggest for a moment that they were entirely without understanding of their words. On the contrary, as we will see, prophets were very much aware, they comprehended much of what they were saying. Rather than being ignorant, they had tremendous insights into the ways of God.

There are many misconceptions about the experience of Old Testament prophets, and we have only touched on three: their mental state, their inspiration, and their comprehension of their prophecies. And if we can ever hope to understand prophecy correctly, we must always remember that they were mentally aware, that they were organically inspired and that they comprehended much of what they had to say. If we will remember these things, we can go a long way in interpreting Old Testament prophecy.

With this orientation toward a prophet's experience in mind, we may now turn to a second essential hermeneutical perspective: the importance of the original meaning of a prophecy.

ORIGINAL MEANING

From the time of the Reformation, evangelicals have always believed that we must first discover the original meaning of a passage and then submit ourselves to the authority of that original meaning. Well, when it comes to other parts of the Bible, we're

happy to do that, but with Old Testament prophecy, we forget this basic hermeneutical principle. To explore how we do this, we have to look at two different matters: first, popular approaches to exegesis, and then the proper approach to the exegesis of Old Testament prophets. Let's look first at the very widespread, popular approaches to the original meaning of Old Testament prophecy.

POPULAR EXEGESIS

Everywhere you turn today, well-meaning Christians interpret the prophets with very little attention to the original meaning intended by the prophets. These popular approaches may be characterized in at least two ways: they are atomistic, and they are ahistorical.

Atomistic

What do we mean when we say that popular exegesis is atomistic? Well, it's very typical for Christians to read the prophets as collections of loosely connected predictions. Instead of reading carefully through large sections of a prophetic book, we are usually satisfied to focus on a catch phrase, or some special word. At times, a few verses come under consideration, but that's about as large a context as most Christians consider when they read Old Testament prophets. An atomistic approach to Old Testament prophecy simply won't do.

Ahistorical

As sad as it is, most evangelicals also don't concern themselves with the historical context of prophets. They don't focus on the human writer and they don't consider the circumstances and the needs of the original audiences of Old Testament prophecies. Instead, prophecies are treated as if they were empty canisters just waiting to be filled with meaning. We don't find the original meaning that fills these canisters already. Instead, we supply our own meaning by looking at events in our day. We look at what is happening in our world and we seek to fill up the empty canisters of prophecy with current, historical events.

I remember teaching in a wonderful church in Europe, and during the question and answer time, a fellow in the back of the room raised his hand up and he said, "Do you think that the disaster at Chernobyl is a sign of the end of time?" Well, I looked at my translator and I said, "Did he really say that?" And the translator said, "Sure" — because the word "Chernobyl" in this man's language meant "wormwood," and in Jeremiah chapter 23, the word "wormwood" is used and associated with the end of time. Well, what did this fellow do? He had found a word in the Bible and he had associated it with something in his experience, and as a result he came up with a sign of the end of times. Well, what are we to do except read our own ideas into the Bible when we read it

atomistically and without any concern for the historical context of the Old Testament prophets?

Reading our own meaning into Old Testament prophecy is widespread because so many of us read these texts atomistically and without concern for the historical context of the writer and the audience. When original meaning is ignored, we can do very little other than read our own ideas into these Scriptures.

PROPER EXEGESIS

The only way to correct popular approaches to Old Testament prophecy is to develop a proper concern with the original meaning of these texts. In many respects, all we have to do is apply the basic principles of interpretation that we use in other parts of the Bible. The original meaning of prophecy is to be discovered through grammatico-historical exegesis. This is the only anchor that will keep us from pouring our own meanings into the prophets.

As the term “grammatico-historical” suggests, we must focus on two elements to discover the original meaning. First, we must look at the grammar of a prophecy, and we do this by focusing on the literary context. And second, we must concern ourselves with the historical context of the original writer and the original audience.

Literary Context

As we will see in these lessons, it is simply not enough for us to focus on a word or two here and there, as popular atomistic approaches do. We have to learn how to handle large sections of material, verses and chapters, sections of books, even whole books of prophecy.

For example, we may be interested in the famous prophecy of Isaiah 7:14:

The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son (Isaiah 7:14).

Christians are often satisfied simply to notice certain key words—“virgin” and “child,” and when they do, they feel very comfortable that they have understood what this passage means.

As much as we may feel comfortable with this approach to Isaiah 7:14, to be responsible with this passage, we must go beyond these few key words to consider the entire context. How does this verse fit within Isaiah 7? And how does it fit within this part of the book of Isaiah? And how does it contribute to the whole purpose and meaning of the book of Isaiah? It is only when we set this one verse within its larger context that we can be sure we have understood it correctly.

Historical Context

In addition to looking at the larger literary context of a prophecy, proper exegesis also includes reading prophecies within their historical context. We must think about the

writer and the audience. When most Christians read prophecies they act as if these Scriptures float in timeless space. But grammatico-historical exegesis requires us to put these prophecies back on earth. We ask questions like these: Who wrote these words? When were they written? To whom was he writing? And why were these words written?

For example, when approaching Isaiah 7:14, we should not think of this as a mere batch of words floating in heaven simply waiting to touch ground when Jesus was born. We must bring this verse down to earth. We have to remember that we are reading a passage that describes Isaiah speaking to Ahaz, the King of Judah. And then we have to ask questions like these: Why did Isaiah say these words to Ahaz? What were their circumstances? What was the purpose? And it is only by considering this historical setting that we can ever hope to understand this passage correctly.

So we see that we have to reject popular approaches to Old Testament prophets which are atomistic and ahistorical, and instead we have to work hard to discover the original meaning through grammatico-historical exegesis. Once we understand the original meaning of a prophecy, then we have a secure anchor that will help us understand how to apply prophecy today.

So far, we have seen two areas that we must learn about to overcome our confusion about Old Testament prophets: the prophet's experience, and the importance of original meaning. Now we must turn to a third area that needs careful attention — New Testament perspectives on prophecy.

NEW TESTAMENT PERSPECTIVES

When we consider the outlooks of the New Testament on Old Testament prophecy, many issues come to the foreground. We will return to this subject in later lessons, but at this point it will be helpful to deal with two dimensions of New Testament perspectives: first, the New Testament outlook on the authority of the prophets; and second, the ways in which the New Testament applied Old Testament prophecy.

AUTHORITY

Jesus and the New Testament apostles often showed that they were fully convinced of the authority of Old Testament prophets. They appealed to the writings of the prophets as authoritative, and they also appealed to the intentions of prophets as authoritative.

Prophetic Scriptures

In the first place, Jesus and his apostles affirmed their submission to the sacred Scriptures of the prophets. It nearly goes without saying that Jesus was faithful to the teachings of biblical Judaism in his day. Of course, one of the central teachings of

Judaism of that time was the absolute authority of the Hebrew Bible, and this is why Jesus frequently affirmed that his ministry was in accordance with the sacred Scriptures of the Old Testament. For example, in Matthew 5:17, Jesus himself said:

Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets (Matthew 5:17).

Notice here that Jesus did not simply say that he recognized the authority of Moses, but he also recognized the authority of the prophetic writings. All the writers of the New Testament followed Christ in this way. They constantly referred to the prophets as authoritative Scriptures.

Prophetic Intentions

As important as it is to see that Jesus and his apostles loved the sacred texts of the prophets, it is just as important for us to realize that they were committed to the original intentions of the prophets as well. New Testament writers were not arbitrary in the ways they understood prophecy. They did not impose their own meanings on prophets. Instead, they were deeply concerned with discovering the original meaning of a prophecy and then building on that solid foundation.

It is very popular today for people to think that New Testament writers had a God-given right to interpret the Old Testament any way they wanted to. But nothing could be further from the truth. Two passages from the New Testament will show that New Testament writers were very concerned with the original meaning of Old Testament prophecies.

We can see this deep commitment to the intentions of prophets in the ways that Peter explains himself in Acts 2:29-31. After quoting part of Psalm 16, Peter says this in verse 29:

Brothers, I can tell you confidently that the patriarch David died and was buried, and his tomb is here to this day. But he was a prophet and knew that God had promised him on oath that he would place one of his descendants on his throne. Seeing what was ahead, he spoke of the resurrection of the Christ (Acts 2:29-31).

Notice that Peter did not claim some right to read his own Christian ideas into Psalm 16. On the contrary, he interpreted David's prophetic words in the light of David's experience and David's intentions.

In much the same way, the apostle John also revealed a deep concern with the original meaning of prophecy. In John 12:39-40, John refers to the prophecies of Isaiah 6. Listen to what he says:

As Isaiah says elsewhere: "He has blinded their eyes and deadened their hearts, so they can neither see with their eyes, nor understand

with their hearts, nor turn — and I would heal them” (John 12:39-40).

John applied this passage from Isaiah to the ministry of Jesus. But listen to the way he validated his interpretation. In the very next verse, John 12:41, he appealed to the prophet's intentions.

Isaiah said this because he saw Jesus' glory and spoke about him (John 12:41).

John focused his attention on the experience of Isaiah and how Isaiah intended for his words to be understood. John did not take Isaiah's prophecy in a way that was convenient for his own goals. Instead, he sought to submit himself to the organically inspired intentions of the prophet.

As Christians, we must seek to follow the example of New Testament writers. We should not only look at the Old Testament prophetic text as authoritative, but we must also seek to discover the original meaning behind those prophecies.

APPLICATION

Now as important as the original meaning of prophecy was to Jesus and the writers of the New Testament, they did not simply repeat the original meaning. Instead, Christ and his followers were committed to applying the prophetic word to the dramatic acts of God that were happening in their day. To see how this application process worked, we need to consider two ideas: First, what kinds of expectations for the future did the prophets present? and then, how did New Testament writers see the fulfillment of these expectations?

Prophetic Expectations

Throughout these lessons we'll be describing the kinds of hopes and expectations that the Old Testament predicted for the future, but for now, we will speak in general terms simply to provide an orientation toward New Testament perspectives. Put simply, the prophets knew that sin had wreaked havoc in the world. Even the people of God had become so corrupted that God drove them into exile. But despite these terrible results of sin, the prophets looked forward to a time when God would set things straight. This future would be a time of ultimate judgment against the wicked and eternal blessing for the faithful. The prophets had all kinds of terms they used to describe this climax of human history. They spoke of it as, “The Day of the Lord.” They spoke of it as, “The Latter Days.” This great future would be a time when God intervened into the world and brought all things to their final end.

Prophetic Fulfillments

Now, the New Testament had special ways of handling these Old Testament prophetic expectations. We need to see how they understood the fulfillment of all of these hopes in Christ. In the days of Jesus and the apostles, many Israelites expected that the Day of Retribution was coming very soon. They longed for the Messiah who would bring human history to its climax. And in a word, Christians received Jesus as the Messiah and therefore as the fulfillment of all of these prophetic hopes. Jesus became the hermeneutical center for Christian understanding of Old Testament prophecy.

Jesus himself insisted that interpretation of the prophets must be Christ-centered. He stressed the importance of Christ-centered interpretation on the road to Emmaus as he talked to his disciples. In Luke 24:25-26, Jesus said these words:

How foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Did not the Christ have to suffer these things and then enter his glory? (Luke 24:25-26).

Jesus expected his followers to see him as the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecies. For this reason, the next verse, Luke 24:27, tells us this,

And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself (Luke 24:27).

Notice how Luke put it — Jesus explained all the prophets said about *him*. So it is that New Testament writers affirmed the importance of the original expectations of prophecy. But they also related these prophetic expectations to the person and work of Christ.

Originally, Old Testament prophets set a trajectory of hope, a trajectory of expectation. A future time of great judgment and blessing was coming. Now the New Testament takes that trajectory and traces it into the future and finds fulfillment in the first coming of Christ, in his kingdom today and in the end of the world when Christ returns in glory.

As we will see later in this series of lessons, the New Testament explains that Christ fulfilled all Old Testament prophetic expectations in these three stages of his kingdom: He accomplished much in the inauguration of his kingdom, his earthly ministry two thousand years ago. He continues to fulfill Old Testament expectations in the continuation of his kingdom throughout the whole history of the church. And in the end, Christ will bring all prophecies to complete fulfillment when he returns and brings the consummation of his kingdom. These three stages of Christ's work provided New Testament writers with a hermeneutical model, and with this model, they were able to apply all the expectations and hopes of the Old Testament prophets to their day.

As followers of Christ, we also must learn how to take the expectations of Old Testament prophecy and apply them to the first coming of Christ, the continuation of his kingdom and the second coming of Christ.

CONCLUSION

In this introductory lesson, we have touched on four subjects that will guide our entire study of Old Testament prophecy. We must overcome our confusion over this part of the Bible by focusing on three essential hermeneutical perspectives: We must learn about the experience of prophets, and we must reaffirm the importance of the original meaning of prophecy. And then we must learn how to follow the New Testament perspectives on prophecy.

In the lessons that follow, we are going to explore these three essential hermeneutical perspectives even further. First, we will take a look at the experience of a prophet, and then we are going to take a look at the importance of original meaning. And then, finally, we will explore even more thoroughly how New Testament writers handled Old Testament prophecy. As we look at these various topics, we will discover an outlook on prophecy that will edify the church and bring glory to our God.