

# THE DIFFICULTY OF INTERPRETING OLD TESTAMENT PROPHECY

by

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As is usual in projects like the present one, the first task of the writer is to limit and define his subject. A definition of prophecy is, then, the first consideration. From the standpoint of the Bible's own theory of canonicity, the author of Scripture must be a prophet of God (2 Pet. 1:20-21; Heb. 1:1-2; cf. Deut. 13:1 ff.; 18:19). By virtue of such prophetic mediation, an oracle or other deliverance, whether spoken or written, is a prophecy. This extends to portions customarily designated as history, law, or poetry. The historical books are prophecies about the past; the poetical books are simply prophecies of many varieties in lyrical form (as are also large sections of the so-called Major and Minor Prophets); the Law of Moses is prophecy distinguished by its basic character in relation to the rest of the Bible and by the unique character of the man Moses who was the prophet responsible for it (Hos. 12:13; Dan. 9:10). Students first exposed to the fact that most of that section of the Scripture called prophecy is history--prediction being the exception rather than the rule therein--always find it a surprise.

In a more restricted sense, however, technical discussion recognizes the oracular portions of the Old Testament as prophecy. R. H. Pfeiffer, for example, in his well-known *Introduction to the Old Testament*, speaks of prophecies in the historical books with reference to oral and written deliverances of the prophets presumed to have been imparted to the prophets by special divine revelation. It is this--oracles imparted to prophets under some direct special supernatural power or influence--that is usually more eminently designated by the term *prophecy*. Prophecy thus conceived is found in most of the books of the Old Testament. Examples are the dying blessings of Jacob on his sons in Genesis, the Balaam prophecies of Numbers, the oracles of Deborah in Judges, Samuel's visions, and the unusual deliverances of Elijah in the Samuel-Kings books. There are also Messianic Psalms of David in the Psalter, etc. Of course, there are large sections of such prophecy in the Books of Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Daniel, and the twelve Minor Prophets. It is erroneous to suppose that these prophetic books consist uniformly of supernaturally imparted oracles. Much of them, in fact most of Jeremiah, is simple historical narrative. These books merit the designation prophetic books only in that they are more eminently oracular in content than others. The current arrangement of the Hebrew canon in which the historical books of Joshua through 2 Kings are called *former prophets* and the Major and Minor Prophets (Daniel and Lamentations excepted) are called *latter prophets* does not allow this distinction.

## BASIS OF DIFFICULTY

The very nature of the prophetic office and function, especially the method by which prophets received their oracles from God, made extreme difficulty of interpretation not only inevitable but also of divine appointment.

Though prophets appeared among the Israelites from time to time before Moses and even during his lifetime--and even though Moses himself was a prophet in the broad sense of that word--the actual foundation of this office as the organ of written and spoken divine revelation to Israel did not come until the very closing period of Moses' life. Having made known that his death was imminent and that the Israelites would soon enter Canaan without his leadership, Moses first strictly proscribed any use of or attention to the heathenish devices for learning supposed information (revelation) from the deities of Canaan (necromancy, astrology, etc.; Deut. 18:9-14).

Being without Moses, their leader of forty years who talked with God "mouth to mouth" (Num. 12:8), the Israelites would sense a lack in their new leadership and would be ignorantly tempted by the elaborate, corrupt, "hocus-pocus" ritual of Canaan's baal shrines. But Moses then announced the forming of the prophetic office (Deut. 18:15-19) and promised continuing divine revelation through the lines of prophets (leading at last to "that Prophet") and commanded strict obedience to all the prophets would say or write. At the same time, several certifying signs were announced whereby the Jews would be able infallibly to recognize the true prophet and to detect inevitable impostors (Deut. 18:15-22; 13:1 *ad. fin.*).

These signs were at least five in number. (1) He would be of their own brethren, that is, not a foreigner. (2) He would always speak in Jehovah's name, that is, he would never introduce a message in the name of a heathen god. (3) He would certify himself further by the use of predictive statements which could be tested by fulfillment in his own generation. Jeremiah 28 provides a striking example of this, as does Elijah's prediction of the drought and of its termination. (4) He would be able to perform miracles of power--of which the Old Testament provides many examples. This and the preceding sign constituted supernatural evidence of authentic divine commission. (5) Finally, he would speak nothing contradictory to the previous Mosaic legislation, that is, one prophet would never contradict another.

These prophets were frequently men of surpassing power of thought and expression. But, because of the peculiar manner in which God revealed His truth to them, their oracles were almost always rendered somewhat obscure to their auditors and readers. We are not told of every mode God used (cf. Heb. 1:1) in supplying revelation--the substance of oracular prophecy--but there is abundant evidence of what the usual method was.

There is primarily the definitive statement of Jehovah found in Numbers 12:6-8: "Hear now my words: if there be a prophet among you, I Jehovah will make myself known unto him in a vision, I will speak with him in a dream. My servant Moses is not so; he is faithful in all my

house: with him will I speak mouth to mouth, even manifestly, and not in dark speeches; and the form of Jehovah shall he behold." This shows that the dream or vision was the ordinary mode. It would customarily involve "dark speeches."

Dreams, obviously, are vivid pictures, actions, etc., brought before the consciousness in the sleeping state of the subject. Visions could be (as usage demonstrates) either similar experiences during the waking state or, as in Daniel 7:1 ff., the separate acts or scenes of a night dream like the successive divisions of a play. It is significant that that book universally pronounced the greatest of the Old Testament prophets, Isaiah, is by its divinely appointed author named "The vision of Isaiah" (Isa. 1:1). The case is the same with Obadiah and Nahum.

Further evidence that the customary mode of revealing the data of prophecy to the prophets was the vision (or "sight"; several Hebrew words are used) is the fact that the earlier name for prophet (*nabhi'*) is said to be *seer*; i.e., *one who sees* (visions; Hebrew, *ro'en*, 1 Sam. 9:9). Moreover, their false imitators are said to prophesy "a false vision" (Jer. 14:14), a "vision of their own heart" (Jer. 23:16). And, the poverty of an era in divine prophecy is said to be because "there was no frequent vision" (1 Sam. 3:1). In Daniel 9:24, vision and prophecy are well-nigh equated.

So the usual manner of imparting the prophet's message to the prophet himself involved the necessary obscurity of visions. God Himself calls them "dark speeches" (Hebrew, *chideth*, Num. 12:8). That Samson's riddles are eight times called by this name in Judges 14 further emphasizes the obscurity of this kind of supernatural revelation. The word is also rendered "hard questions," "dark sayings," "dark sentences," and "proverb."

### EVIDENCE OF DIFFICULTY

Premillennialists, with all Protestant believers, insist that the essential message of Scripture is clear enough that laymen without technical training can interpret the Bible for themselves. Yet premillennialists need especially to be reminded that some facts about predictive prophecy render it more obscure than other portions of the Bible. That we premillennialists exist as a school differing in such a radical way in eschatology from others with whom we are usually in complete harmony in other areas of doctrine witnesses to the difficulties of prediction. Our insistence on literal interpretation, wherever possible, has frequently led some incautious exponents of our peculiar doctrine to exaggerate the plainness of meaning in prophecy and to play down the real obscurity of very much of it. Examples are numerous. A glaring one, embarrassing because of its frequency, is the inaccurate and misleading affirmation that prophecy is history prewritten. Rarely indeed is the precise shape of future events, much less their exact relation in time, outlined in sufficient detail and with such clarity that those events may be said to be prewritten as history.

It must therefore be recognized by the interpreter of the prophecies and be resolutely held

before his attention that a certain degree of obscurity is of the very essence of most predictive prophecy. Those "speeches" are sometimes so "dark" that the puzzled authors were no more able than their devout readers to comprehend fully the meaning (1 Pet. 1:10-11; cf. Acts 8:20; Dan. 12:4).

Hence, a deep humility is a prerequisite to successful treatment of the prophecies of Scripture. The interpreter must bow before the almighty hand of God in submission to the limitation He has placed. Having accepted the difficulty, he should proceed in dependence upon God for illumination and with a profound respect and tolerance for other Christians of equal or greater gifts, and of integrity, who arrive at somewhat different results.

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Robert D. Culver, "The Difficulty of Interpreting Old Testament Prophecy," *Bibliotheca Sacra*, vol. 114, num. 455 (July 1957), pp. 201-5. **Note:** The text has not been modified.