

MEETING JESUS IN OLD TESTAMENT PROPHECIES

The aim of this session is to understand the literary features of Old Testament prophecies and to identify and apply the key principles for interpreting Old Testament prophecies.

Recommended Reading

Fee, G. and Stuart, D. *How to read the Bible for all its worth*, pp. 165-186.

INTRODUCTION

The Prophets were God's covenant enforcers or prosecuting attorneys rather than mere fortune-tellers.

The prophets had at least three roles:

- Prosecution;
- Persuasion; and
- Prediction.

A. LITERARY FEATURES OF THE PROPHETS

The prophetic books are largely written in poetic form

- Biblical poetry is filled with metaphors and emotions. Poetry is a compressed language i.e. meant to say a lot in a few words.
- Word pictures are shocking, vivid, easy to remember, and connect with both the head and heart.
- Metaphors cannot be understood based on dictionary definitions, so a strict literal reading is rarely helpful.
- With the exception of prophecies related to the Messiah, the fulfilment of prophecies have a translucent rather than transparent quality i.e. how a certain prophecy is fulfilled is not spelled out in detail.

The prophetic books are often anthologies i.e. collection of oral messages given during their lifetimes

- This means a chronological order is sometimes difficult to establish.
- This explains why big shifts in topics sometimes happen and why repetitions are common. So it follows the practice of outlining a book, helpful for NT letters, might not yield the same result for the prophets.

B. COMMON THEMES IN THE PROPHETS

Although the prophets spoke at different times to different circumstances, most of the prophets have at least three themes in common.

1. Repent because you have broken the covenant.
 - To fully understand the prophets we need to understand the importance of the Law i.e. covenant with Israel through Moses. Israel's history from Joshua to 2 Kings is often viewed in light of the Law.
 - What aspects of the covenant were broken? They cluster around idolatry, social injustice (cf. Lev. 19) and religious ritualism (e.g. Jer. 7:3-10; Isa. 58:1-14; Mic. 6:1-8).
2. If you don't repent, you will be judged.
3. Beyond God's judgment is hope of a glorious restoration (e.g. Isa. 65:17-25)

C. SOME GUIDELINES TO HELP INTERPRET THE PROPHETS

- Listen to it not just with the head but with the heart as well.
- Look for evidence in narrative sections in the prophets and the historical books for the condition of the people at the time.
- Explore the full range of meanings of the prophetic images. Beware of reading the prophets literally and superficially.
- Look for overarching themes.
- Focus on what we agree on. Be humble when considering other possibilities on how prophecy might be fulfilled.

EXERCISE

1. Read 1 Kings 14:10-16, a prophecy concerning King Jeroboam.

- Identify the main elements of the judgment. How do you think it is fulfilled?
- Read 1 Kings 14:17-20 and 1 Kings 15:25-30. How was it actually fulfilled? What does this example teach us about bible prophecy?

2. Read Micah 3:1-4:5. How are we to understand this text?

- What is its historical context? Read Micah 1:1. For Micah's role see for example 6:1-2.
- Does this passage include one or more of the three main themes found in many prophetic passages? For example, read 3:1-3, 5:9-11.
- Read 3:1-3. Should this be understood literally? What is Micah's point?
- Read 4:1-5. Identify the imageries used here to describe the future hope of restoration. How should this be understood? What is Micah's point here?