

MINOR PROPHETS

Prophecy in one of its aspects may be described as the philosophy of history in the form of a drama. As one mode of conveying their conceptions the prophets display the incidents before our imagination working toward their goal with the realistic clearness of drama. When examined such prophetic compositions are found to go beyond the machinery of dramatic literature. They borrow from all other literary departments special modes of treatment and blend them together into the most highly wrought and spiritual of literary forms which is called the rhapsody. Chapters 44 to 66 in Isaiah is a rhapsody of Zion redeemed.

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SPECIAL STUDY TWO INTERPRETING THE PROPHETS

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Prophetic writings constitute a very unique and important type of literature. Included in the canon of the Old Testament are seventeen books of prophecy. Five major books are separated because of their greater length, Isaiah being first and foremost. The shorter books compose the Jewish "Book of the Twelve", or the minor prophets. Any thorough study of God's word must make room for an examination of these books.

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The Old Testament prophets are dynamic figures who present colorful pictures and tremendous challenges. There has been a gross misunderstanding and misuse of this section of the Bible. An age of fear has produced a mass tension, which is easy prey for sensationalists who would warp the word to satisfy human curiosity. With reckless disregard of proper interpretation, men have made a tawdry display of determining "times and seasons".

A correct exegesis (or leading out) of the text of the prophets can be invaluable to the Christian. The New Testament writers quoted profusely from them for evidential purposes. They were also used to illustrate, emphasize and explain the nature and mission of both the kingdom and the messiah. Our understanding of this New Testament usage will deepen with our understanding of the prophets. "For what was written in former days was written for our instruction, that by steadfastness and by the encouragement of the scriptures we might have hope." (Romans 15:4) "And no prophecy ever came by the will of man: but men spake from God, being moved by the Holy Spirit." (II Peter 1:21)

There is also a widening of our horizons, so to speak, as we grasp a great sweep of human history and understand God's eternal purposes through the ages. There is a devotional quality developed as we yield to the joy of the kingdom so beautifully expressed in these writings. "Thou wilt keep him in perfect peace, whose mind is stayed on thee: because he trusteth in thee." (Isaiah 26:3)

A prophet, says the dictionary, is one who speaks for another, especially for God. A secondary definition describes him as a seer who foretells future events. It is only within relatively recent times that Christians have realized that the major truth of the Old Testament prophecies is to be sought in the first rather than the second of these definitions. The prophets, however, become a perpetual storehouse of treasure as we see the certainty of judgment on sin, the holiness of God, and a history of His chosen people often left unlearned.

There are certain basic axioms of interpretation to follow when interpreting any literary work. The only reason for the existence of the office of prophet was that of *communicating* God's will to man in man's language. The act of communicating is dependent upon both the *scientific* recording of historical and didactical prose and the artistic creation of figurative and symbolical poetry. There are certain basic axioms which must be followed in all literature, whether prose or poetry or both, because all literature seeks, in one way or another, to communicate. There are at least ten basic axioms to interpreting the Bible.

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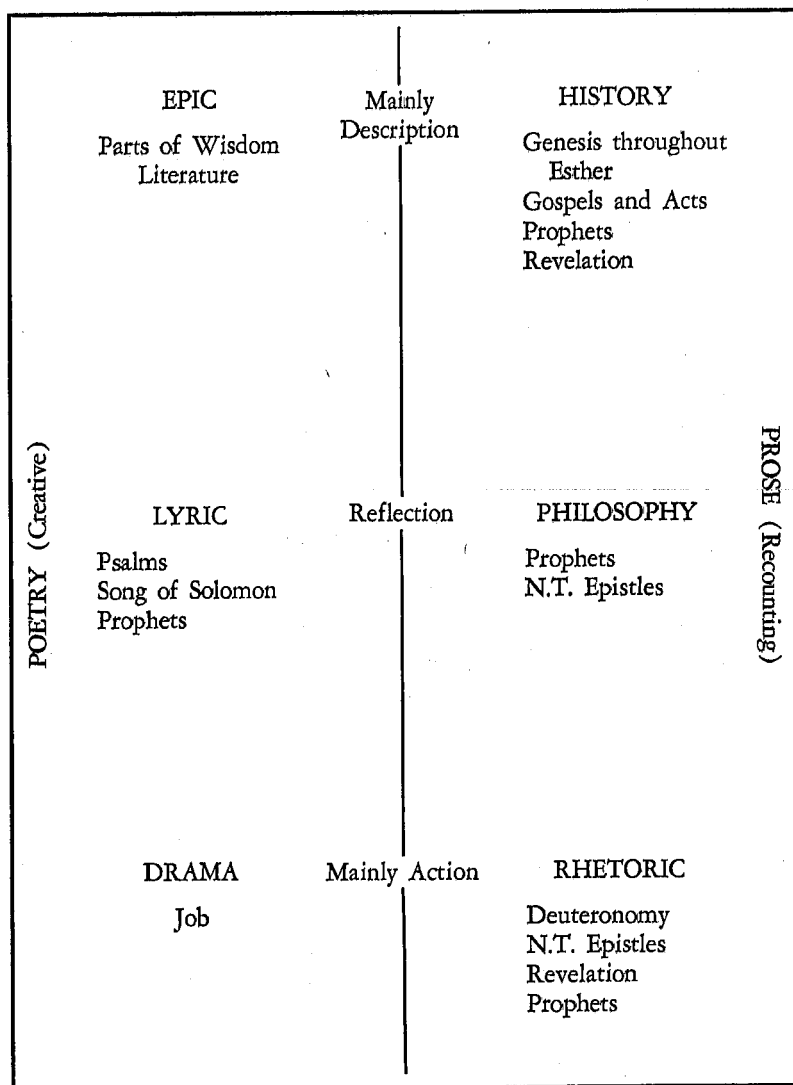
TEN BASIC AXIOMS TO INTERPRETATION

1. The true object of speech is the impartation of thought
2. Language is a reliable medium of communication
3. Usage determines the meaning of words
4. Two writers do not independently express thought alike
5. Every writer is influenced by his environment
6. An author's purpose determines the character of his production
7. We must use both reason and intelligence to understand what God said
8. The true interpretation is what the author intended to say; God's Word has *one intended meaning*, not many conflicting ones
9. The language of the Bible is the language of men, even when it is used to express divine truth, and is to be interpreted by the same methods and principles as are appropriate for any other message of similar literary nature.
10. When any Bible passage is used for any other meaning than what the author intended to express by it, it is not what the inspired writer had in mind; therefore, such meaning read into it does not have the authority of the scripture.
 1. There are four cardinal points of literature:
 - a. *Description*—the incident itself belongs to the past, the words describing it are throughout the words of the author himself (Homer & Milton)
 - b. *Presentation*—the author himself nowhere appears but he leaves the reader to hear words of those personages who actually took part in the incident—perhaps to see their doings (Shakespeare)
 - c. *Poetry*—"creative literature", the poet makes something, or he creates, or adds to the sum of existence, by figures, symbols, and other poetic vehicles
 - d. *Prose*—only discusses what already exists
 2. The most important distinguishing feature of Hebrew literature is its overlapping of prose with poetry.
 3. Prophecy in one of its aspects may be described as the philosophy of history erected into a drama. This is called a RHAPSODY.

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DESCRIPTIVE

(Author's words throughout)



PRESENTATIVE

(Author nowhere appears)

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Hebrew prophecy is not poetic in the strictest sense. Yet, there is the artistic beauty and dramatic grandeur in it which is familiar to all poetic literature. The recognized canons of poetic art will be seen to apply to Hebrew prophecy. The first canon is: "The truth conveyed must contain a profound interpretation of life, and be vital and important." The second is: "The truth conveyed must be expressed in terms of artistic beauty".

It is to our advantage that prophecy was given by poetic revelation. Poetic revelation:

- a. Aids exegesis and gives opportunity to apply laws of harmony and opposition
- b. Makes memorization easier
- c. Gives literary charm
- d. Increases vividness and emotional impact

As it was the primary aim of the Hebrew religious teachers (prophets) to influence the heart and conscience, the poetic element, though never entirely suppressed, was held in restraint to further the ends of spiritual instruction.

LITERARY ASPECTS OF OLD TESTAMENT PROPHECY

Old Testament prophecy, as literature, fits the definition, contains the basic elements, consists of the various forms, fulfills the four-fold purpose, and produces the creative results of literature.

— DEFINITION —

"Literature" has been aptly defined as the best thoughts of a people, in the best forms, set down in writing. No one can argue but that the Old Testament prophets consistently voiced the best thoughts of the Jewish people. To read the prophets is to conclude that they are expressed in the best forms available—either then, or now. Every figure of speech common to man is to be found in Old Testament prophecy. Indeed, one might even say that the Old Testament is the text book and main source of example for any who could study figures of speech, persuasion, or rhetoric. Old Testament prophecy adequately fits the definition of "literature".

Going further, we find that the prophets not only meet the definition of, but set the standard for all that is to be included in the idea of classical literature. The words and phrases of the prophet-bards of old are packed with meaning and significance. Such words are. . . .

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"Hear this word, you cows of Bashan, who are in the mountain of Samaria, who oppress the poor, who crush the needy, who say to their husbands, 'Bring, that we may drink! . . .', not only stir the emotions, but present a picture so vivid as to startle the apathetic. Phrases such as . . . "prepare to meet your God, O Israel, For lo, he who forms the mountains and creates the winds, and declares to man what is his thought, who makes the morning darkness, and treads on the heights of the earth—the Lord, the God of hosts, is his name! . . .", appeals to the innate within every man. The prophets appeal to broad human values: to love, to hatred, to emotion, to righteousness, to sin, to motive; to conscience, to soul, to heart. They stir, they threaten, they mold, they use. They inquire, they demand, they entreat. They express universal feelings and emotions. They indeed determine the definition of what we call classical literature.

— ELEMENTS —

Literature must consist of four main elements. (1) Characters: the character must have a perfectly clear and reasonably logical motive. His locale must be understood. Was he speaking to rich, to poor; to stranger, to wife; to heathen, to priest; to man, to God? (2) Plot: The series of events must include a situation—characters in action. There must be suspense—that which holds the imagination as well as concentration. There should be high points, as well as lulls. And finally there should be results—that is, a real change, in character, in situation, in attitude, in something. (3) Theme: There must be an idea, a basic truth expressed, and presented in a way that it is understood, as well as appreciated. (4) Style: The use of certain words, or rather, the prevalent use of some words, the point of view, the location, the manner of speaking, and the personality of the author combine to reveal the author's style.

It will suffice to show how only one of the Old Testament prophets contains all the basic elements of literature to defend his literary aspects.

The shortest of the prophets, Obadiah, seems to adequately illustrate. We find the characters, Edomites and Israelites, real men, neighbors, blood brothers, yet engaged in conflict. Each has a motive: Edom—greed, avarice, thirst for wealth; Israel—anger, vengeance, pride. The locale is clear: Edom—"you who live in the clefts of the rock" . . . "your nest . . . set among the stars" . . . "Edom" . . . "Esau"; Israel—"Jerusalem" . . . "gates" . . . "my holy mountain" . . . "Mt. Zion". The plot begins with a call against the high hand of Edom, which has betrayed its brother. The situation is this: Israel was being bothered by

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warring armies. Edom stood off and laughed—yes, applauded. The Edomites not only refused to help, but aided the plunderers in the pillaging, killing the survivors, looting the goods. Suspense mounts as one wonders—What will happen to such a nation, for such an action? What will happen that Edom will be brought down? High points are the building up of the treachery of Edom and the building up of the Lord's prophecy against Edom. The results of the plot are clear. Edom is destroyed, and one gets the uncomfortable feeling that such will happen to anyone who betrays his brother. The theme, the basic idea, is that the Lord will avenge His elect against their attackers and "The Kingdom will be the Lord's." The style of Obadiah, his changing from present to future to past, all in one sentence; his parallelisms and metonymies, his joyful speech, his point of view, his location, combine to completely fulfill all the elements of literature.

— FORMS —

The forms of literature especially applicable to the Old Testament prophecy would be (1) history. With history, all the prophets are concerned, being basically, historical works. Aside from history we have (2) biography—as illustrated in parts of Isaiah, Jonah, Daniel, etc., (3) essays—as contained in Jeremiah and Lamentations; (4) drama—as represented in every prophet; (5) poetry—as exemplified in Zechariah, Nahum, Micah, Isaiah, (6) short story—as epitomized in Jonah and pictured in Amos.

Almost every form of literature can be shown in its best form in Old Testament prophecy.

— PURPOSE —

The purpose of good literature takes four forms. (1) The first of these is simply communication. Communication relates events and answers questions. It simply makes known many facts. (2) Next is argument. This is an attempt to persuade, to sway, to influence toward a particular attitude or position. (3) Description simply portrays a picture to the reader. (4) Narration is an account of action or events with no attempt to stir or motivate.

Old Testament prophecy answers nearly every question man had asked prior to the CROSS—and serves to answer many after. It communicates. Prophecy argues. It maintains the deity and foreknowledge of God. It sustains the pre-eminence of good and destruction of evil. It retains the dignity of man. Needless to say, prophecy describes and narrates.

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— RESULT —

Prophecy, as found in the Old Testament, best fits the description literature, when we consider its creative results. Prophecy is able to stimulate emotion and draw a definite response from the one who reads. He may dislike it, he may hate it, he may never touch it again, but he reacts. He may cherish it, he may grow fond of it, he may use it constantly, but he reacts.

It has been said before, and safely so, and here bears repeating—A man may not like the Old Testament prophets because they lay bare his heart, he may love them for their beauty and pristine sacredness, but once reading, he will never be the same. This is the mark of true literature.

The Bible is expressed in human language. If a person is to communicate meaning to another the writer must use words and figures which are familiar to the reader. First in order to interpret and understand the Bible the human side must be studied. The human figures, illustrations, and modes of expression, the thoughts and feelings the situations, scenes, and characters must be comprehended and understood. It is not a message until the words awaken the human mind and bring about a picture of scenes and situations.

In his study of the text and its meanings, one must understand the meanings of the words employed. Language's meaning is in the minds of the users, so the interpreter must discover the agreement that existed between the prophet and the people to whom he spoke before he can call up in his own mind the same concepts. Words lose their original meanings through the years; the interpreter must realize that the prophet spoke to the people of his day, not to those who would live thousands of years later. The interpreter should study the etymology of the word, its actual meaning in common usage, and its usage as a synonym. The fundamental principle in understanding the meaning of words in their context is that a word has only one meaning in one place.

Often the chief hindrance to interpretation of the Bible is felt to be the dignity of the message, the sublimity of the scenes and situations, the depth and spirituality of the truth and experiences. The Bible should be approached in the simplest possible attitude; there must be no false reverence; there must be nothing stilted; the reader must become a little child and accept in the simple wonder and express in the most human manner possible these exalted truths. Theories of interpretation are sometimes a hindrance. The interpreter must be both an artist and a scientist, one who identifies himself with the truth he

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portrays. A searching study of each passage is necessary. The artist must comprehend the problem from a different point of view than the exegete; he must not only understand, he must feel; he must not only understand the parts, he must create the whole into one picture; he must have a positive and complete unity, and must pass beyond the negative stage of examination and rejection of what does not belong to the passage. The artist must present the spirit of the passage, and not theories or opinions; it is not for him to give formulas of chemical analysis or theories of cookery but to furnish to hungry souls the bread of life.

If the Bible is written to human beings and by human beings then the interpretation of it must be governed basically by the laws of literature. Regarding the Bible as literature does not degrade it, but it is more exalted by it. The literary study of the Bible, to be of any advantage to interpretation, must be simple and profound study of its real spirit, a creation of the scenes by the imagination and the sympathetic assimilation of its experience. A true experimental interpretation is the real climax of true literary study. . . . True interpretation demands the ideas be grasped, and appreciated, that the scene be really created, and that the sympathy be genuine. Hence it is first necessary to come to some realization of the various literary forms which are found in the Bible, and to understand the vocal expression of the lyric, the dramatic, and the epic spirit, and how far each specific literary forms modifies vocal expression.

— THE FACTS —

To understand any literature one must be thoroughly familiar with it. This, of course, is the first prerequisite to interpreting the prophets. The wide extent of Biblical prophecy demands a very complete knowledge of Bible content to interpret any part in light of the whole. Individual prophecies are of a partial nature and must be supplemented by others, in order to envision the full scope.

To learn a grouping together of the prophets by content and chronology is conducive to a right interpretation.

PRE-ASSYRIAN (Times of Prosperity)

Obadiah—What God will do to the enemies of His elect

Joel—The Day of Jehovah manifested in judgment and redemption

Jonah—God's love for all who will repent

Amos—The sovereignty of God over all nations

Hosea—The love and longsuffering of God for a rebellious people

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ASSYRIAN (Decadence and impending destruction)

Isaiah—The glory of God in judgment and in redemption

Micah—Moral reformation by spiritual application of the law of God

Nahum—The vengeance of the Lord up His adversaries

CHALDEAN (Impending downfall of Judah and her utter degeneration)

Zephaniah—The day of the Lord's wrath followed by blessing

Habakkuk—In the face of God's use of the heathen to judge the elect,
the man of God must live by faith

Jeremiah—Lamentation, punishment, steadfastness, hope

EXILIC (Out of the chastizement of servitude comes hope)

Ezekiel—The scattered sheep to have a Good Shepherd in the future

Daniel—God's king and kingdom to destroy the sovereignty of the god
of this world in the times of the Gentiles

POST-EXILIC (Rebuilding and preparing for the coming of God's presence—Immanuel)

Haggai—Need to rebuild God's house instead of worrying about one's
own

Zechariah—The One to come will be a meek and lowly, persecuted and
pierced Saviour

Malachi—The One to come will be One who judges

Historical contemporaneity must be considered and careful attention should be given customs and geography. The Hebrew prophet was primarily a man who spoke the message of God to the people of the day. Usually this was a call for repentance and righteousness, with the present time his chief concern. The general background and, frequently, specific details given in the historical books serve as a key to the proper interpretation of the prophetic messages. Conversely, the utterances of the prophets contribute much to the understanding of Israel's history. They expounded the spiritual meaning of the law, using the past as their primary source of teaching material. Pleading for a heart-felt religion, they substantiated the Mosaic law as a valid covenant and rule of life for their day.

Problems which are still present must be examined with the best tools known to human interpretation. The study of the prophets is worthy of such exertion because of the historical and spiritual link which it forges between the Old and the New Covenants.

The prophet himself, the spokesman for God, must be studied because God at times left the prophet comparatively free to express His

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truths in the prophet's own style or in mannerisms of the prophet's own personality. A man is shaped by his education and his environment; this influence shows in his writings. Amos' profession of shepherding, Micah's simple country background, and Isaiah's intellectual and royal connections affected their messages. Another influence was the natural thought pattern of the Hebrews. This would affect the prophet's thinking and his expression to others for the sake of easy communication. The moral character of the prophet would also have a definite bearing on his expression. A prophet's moral character is captured in the reading of the entire book, but attention to the details shed added light also.

A prophet is influenced by the people to whom he speaks. His message must be made understandable and meaningful according to their manner of expression and frame of reference. In order that the prophet will be heard, he must arouse curiosity and attention in his audience through his manner of speaking. Thus, we must understand prophecy by taking into consideration the understanding of those with whom the prophet was primarily concerned, his contemporaries.

His physical surroundings affected the style of the prophet's message. The geography of his country would determine many of his illustrations and figures of speech; the interpreter must be familiar with geography. Both the prophet and his audience were affected in their thought patterns by the political life, history, climate, major occupations, and religious life with its sects and idolatries. One must "share with" the people of the time in order to understand prophecy.

The prophetic office is unique in the catalogue of human instruments to execute the will of God. Many were used spontaneously as prophets, but the prophetic office was reserved for a select few.

1. *The prophet of God was foremost a speaker for God to his fellows.* As the bold mouthpieces of the divine mind they became the conscience of the nation. Without respect of persons they spared not priests or kings, for all fell under their influence. Their primary function was accomplished in the present time. They were fearless preachers of sin, righteousness, and judgment to their contemporaries.

2. *Prophets were also predictors of events yet unborn.* The foretelling of fates hidden under the hand of the future was a tremendous element of ancient biblical prophecy. Chiefly the predictions were of impending wrath upon sin unrepented of and to comfort with precious promises of the redemption of Israel. As we from the pinnacle of another present time look back at predictive prophecy, it becomes evidential in value. It lays a foundation for faith. In the light of

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fulfilled prophecy we confirm the authentic voice of God. We find real strength in the understanding of the Messianic prophecies.

3. *The interpretation of History's lessons and expounding of the Mosaic law were included in the basic duties of the prophet.* The prophet's chief source of didactic and illustrative material was out of the past. This he used to inspire men to keep the Law in spirit as well as in letter. This enabled him to direct men's thoughts to the end of the Mosaic economy and to create a desire for the Messianic reign.

4. *The prophet is a historian.* In his productions we get a glimpse into the life of that colorful era; thus, the gap between the testaments is spanned. In the understanding of this history we are better equipped to grasp the intent and meaning of the new testament scriptures.

— THE FOCUS —

The repetitious, resounding theme of the prophets must be kept ever in mind: sin, judgment, and restoration (or hope). The prophets were concerned with more than just a land and a people. God's covenant to Abraham and the realization of that covenant in history—Christ incarnate—is the focal point.

Generally too much eschatological significance is read into the books of the prophets. Seldom is there a mention of Heaven. Instead, the prophecies point to primarily and almost exclusively Christ and complete fulfillment in Him, (cf. Rev. 19:10).

The basic doctrine of the Old Testament prophets is that God is King and Controller of the universe, all nations included. He has complete rule over history. There seems to be a general outline followed in each book:

Pronouncement of sin

Prediction of judgment

Plan for repentance

Promise of salvation (both temporal and spiritual at times)

As a result of the unity of theme, there is seldom a chronological system involved in prophecy. Widely separated events may seem closely related in a passage. The prophet sees together and at once upon the surface of the picture, things which are to be fulfilled only successively and gradually. Past or present tense may be used in referring to events of the future. Ref. Joel 2:27-28

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SOME COMMON CHARACTERISTICS
OF THE O.T. PROPHETS . . .

1. Language is highly figurative—excellent literature
2. Strong and impartial condemnation of sin (ruler and ruled alike are condemned)
3. Each prophet definitely claims to be inspired (however, their revelation is partial)
4. Proclaim comfort, hope and redemption through the Remnant and the Branch
5. Teach eventual salvation of the Gentiles
6. Basic doctrine is that God is King and Controller of the Universe, including all nations. God is always in control of history
7. They demand righteous living based on the righteous nature of their God
8. They plead for a "heart-felt religion" (yet one which obeys the Levitical law)
9. They substantiate the Mosaic law as a valid covenant and rule of life for their day
10. Most of them include the promise or hint of a new covenant
11. Heathen nations and peoples are responsible to God's will, as far as they know it, and will be so judged
12. Some prophecies are, in a sense, perpetual and/or have a double fulfillment
13. The prophets each used different methods of approach or appeal to their audiences or readers

— THE FORMS —

Recognize the forms of prophetic literature. Understand the text in the language of the day. It was truly the message of God to the people, but it was stated in the words of the man whom God honored with the responsibility of translating His teaching to human minds. This is illustrated in the classic poetic language of Isaiah and the blunt, prosaic sentences of Micah.

The form is conditioned by the views and ideas of the time of utterance. The prophets were compelled to speak so that their hearers could understand them. While some of it is strictly sermoniac in form, much of it is written dramatically. Ezekiel's dry bones, Daniel's image and Isaiah's vision of the Lord afford unique presentation of messages. Jeremiah's purchased property was a sign of the prophet, and thus he made his prophecy. Lyric prophecy had a certain rhythm and lent

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itself to singing. Micah set the scene for a drama, Nabum penned a funeral dirge, and Habakkuk's prophecy was a rhapsody of the Chaldeans. The type of language might be poetic, visional, apocalyptic, etc. Quoting from the I.S.B.E.:

"The prophets, as a rule, exhibited an elevated form of language and are more or less poetical. However, in modern times some scholars are inclined to go too far in claiming that these addresses are given in a careful freer form of expression than is Arabic or Sanskrit meter, and this is all the more the case with the discourses of the prophets, which were not intended for musical rendering, and which are expressed in a rhythmic constructed rhetoric, which appears now in one and then in another form of melody, and often changes into prose."

Poetry, whether found in the Bible or elsewhere, is granted a license of extravagance. Figurative language furnished gorgeous chariots for the conveyance of the rhythmic mind.

Many figures of speech were used. Inanimate objects acted or reacted . . . (personification) . . . as in Isaiah 55 where the mountains and hills sang and the trees clapped their hands.

Parallelism is an outstanding characteristic of Hebrew prophecy. Two synonymous statements might parallel each other, or perhaps the parallelism is a contrast. In other cases, a climax is reached by a redundant, ever intensifying attack.

Proverbs, parables, fables, hyperboles, and the like were all employed, combining with distinct forms to veil the meaning of the prophets. The veil was required because of their spiritual nearsightedness and immaturity.

Prophecy may be given in types or symbols which foreshadow a future event. These type-prophecies differ from poetry in their distinctness, veiling, and double sense.

The figurative language used in varying forms of prophecy affects one's understanding. The Hebrews not only had their own idioms, as any people do, but they were accustomed to using hyperboles for emphasis. These exaggerations were a part of the thought pattern and must be taken into consideration even in the writings of the inspired prophets. Communication in figures was common in that day and one must be careful not to break down the lines of communication to the present time by trying to make all the prophets literal.

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— SPECIFIC FORMS —

a. *Prophetic Discourse*—"Where the sermon and political harangue became one and the same . . . rhetorical."

b. *Lyric Prophecy*—"Its structure is antistrophic stanzas of recitative and rhythm . . . an opening couplet, a closing refrain, etc."

c. *Symbolic Prophecy*—"Discourses with object-texts, i.e., external things treated symbolically, cf. Jeremiah and his linen girdle, Jeremiah 13; 18:1-17; and 24.

d. *Sign of the Prophet*—"When a prophecy had reference to future time, and was illustrated with some symbol that was not transitory but durable, the emblem would remain to be confronted with the fulfilled prophecy, and so would vindicate the authority of the prophet. Such an emblem would then become a "sign of the prophet."

e. *The Vision*—"The emblem texts are merely presented in supernatural vision instead of being seen by the ordinary eyesight. cf. Amos and Ezekiel.

f. *The Vision Emblem and Revelation*—(a) Revelation of the future; (b) Revelation of Law and Ideal.

g. *The Parable*—A sermon with a symbolic text.

h. *Prophetic Intercourse*—(a) with God (vision of their call); (b) with inquirers; (c) dialectic prophecy where there is no actual interview between the prophet and another interlocutor, but the discourse takes the form of a reply to an imaginary objection or interruption (all of Malachi seems dialectic); (d) with the world.

i. *Dramatic Prophecy*—A scene or situation is created by dialogue entirely. No comment comes from the prophet; no description, except so far as he may be a party to the scene, cf. Micah 6:1-8 "The Lord's controversy before the mountains."

j. *The Doom Song*—"A prophetic utterance directed against some particular city, nation or country . . . fluctuations of power and mutual relations between Israel and her heathen neighbors imposed a continual foreign policy on the kingdoms of Israel and Judah . . . there was also the perpetual function of Israel as a nation to uphold the worship of the true God amidst nations of idolaters; and the constant witnesses to this were the prophets . . . one product of such a ministry was the Doom Song (cf. Isaiah 21; 22:14; Ezekiel 26; 28).

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k. *The Rhapsody*—"To harmonize the idea of judgment with the working of events through realistic clearness of drama." (cf. the Rhapsody of the Chaldeans of Habakkuk—If the Chaldeans, cruel, god-less embodiment of might without right were to be God's instrument of judgment would not the instrument be far worse than that against which it is used?" The disproving of this is the burden of Habakkuk's Rhapsody).

The best way to be sure that one has interpreted the prophets correctly is to accept divine interpretation. Parallel passages, inspired words, and fulfillment often clear up one's problems in understanding the prophets.

Parallel passages make clear obscure words and ideas. The various ways a word is used in other books of the Bible may give a clue to its meaning in a vague passage. This is especially useful in lines of Hebrew poetry when the same idea is repeated in every second line, with the words slightly changed. Ideas, as well as words, may be made clear through discovery of synonyms used in parallel passages.

— THE FIGURES —

It's been said, "when the plain sense of scripture makes common sense, seek no other sense." However, a literal fulfillment of all predictions must never be assumed. The prophets contain the loftiest of Oriental figurative language. It is wise to be acquainted with basic principles governing this kind of speech.

It isn't always an easy matter to determine between the figurative and the literal. The sense of the context may give some indication, and there may even be an explicit claim for a literal meaning. When the definite is put for the indefinite (especially in expressions of number and time) or when a literal interpretation involves an impossibility, it is figurative. Also, a passage which mocks or which seems to condemn good action and demand bad action is figurative. Consider the general content of Biblical truth, for if a literal interpretation would create contradictions, understand it in a figurative sense.

SOME RULES FOR INTERPRETATION OF PROPHECY ARE:

- (1) "Determine the historical background of the prophet and the prophecy. This establishes the frame of reference in which the prophet writes, and so gives interpretive light to his expressions." Whether the prophecy is didactic or predictive the study of history is the absolute first starting point.

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- (2) "Determine the full meaning and significance of all proper names, events, geographical references, references to customs or material culture.
- (3) "Determine if the passage is predictive or didactic". Not all prophecy foretells the future, and whether it predicts or not is important.
- (4) "If predictive, determine if fulfilled, unfulfilled, or conditional. If the passage is quoted as fulfilled in the New Testament, then compare the Old Testament statement with the New Testament statement for interpretation of the Old Testament statement. Passages may be used as follows: literally; to prove a point; to explain a point; and to illustrate. If the passage is fulfilled in history, then let history interpret the passage. If the prophecy is conditional, then it may or may not be fulfilled. If the prophecy is unfulfilled the problem is acute. We may be guided by how other prophecy is fulfilled, although this varies immensely.
- (5) Determine if the same theme or concept is also treated elsewhere.
- (6) As a reminder, keep vividly in mind the flow of the passage, that is, pay attention to context.
- (7) Notice that element of prophecy that is purely local or temporal.
- (8) "Recognize that God's special preparatory providences as recorded in the Old Testament were often themselves predictive or prophetic.
- (9) Recognize the particular character of the language used.
- (10) Recognize the possibility of further reference or larger significance.
- (11) Recognize that the language often becomes figurative and allegorical in its wider prophetic application.
- (12) Recognize that God has made self-imposed limits of revelation.
- (13) Recognize the possibility of varying and mistaken interpretations.
- (14) Recognize that the primary purpose of prophecy and of its interpretation is to reveal Christ, and to enable us to learn of Him.
- (15) Remember always the practical moral purpose of the Word of revelation.
- (16) Sometimes prophecy was, like history, written beforehand.
- (17) Many times the thoughts respecting the future are presented in highly figurative language, so that it is difficult to get the meaning.

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- (18) "The peculiarities of the prophets are maintained in their writings". The Lord, in most instances, must have supplied the necessary intelligence by inspiration, but then allowed each man to tell this message to the people in his own way, or manner. If the Hebrew prophet could not get the thought God gave him words. The prophets presented their message with clearness and force even though the time of fulfillment was unknown to them.
- (19) The prophecy was written for the people of that day, and should be interpreted within the covenant background—God's redemptive purpose in history which is fulfilled in Christ and the Church. The incarnation of Christ is the dividing line between the Old and New Testaments, because of the incarnation of Jesus the Old Testament became preliminary or temporary. The coming of Christ and the redemption of Christ is the goal of prophecy. The focal point of prophecy is the future hope. There is a double emphasis in prophecy, that is, two chief points: (a) The goal of God's covenant, and (b) The way to that goal. God moves toward his goal through two means: (1) Judgment, a call for repentance; and (2) Redemption, the act of deliverance. The *final* covenant goal was *universal redemption*. In interpreting we must keep our eyes on the goal. The prophets remind us of where we should put our trust, that is, in God and in God's redemptive promises for they are real promises. God is moving toward the goal of His promise through judgment and redemption.
- (20) The prophecy should be interpreted in the light of the New Testament too, considering the harmonizing of it with its New Testament fulfillment. Often things prophesied were for our use today but this was not the primary purpose.
- (21) In both literal and figurative language, some things prophesied were widely separated in time.
- (22) Prophets were expounders of what the law really meant spiritually. The chief aim was to keep the spirit as well as the letter of the law.
- (23) Some of the language of the prophets is very literal, especially concerning sins of that hour.

The prophets were able to keep their consciousness and self-control while receiving and delivering their revelations. God's message was in the language of the people and the prophet himself, but the prophet never surrendered his personality to the point that he became

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merely a dictation machine. Every prophet claims to be inspired, and the New Testament agrees that the prophets were inspired. The New Testament constantly uses the Old Testament prophets and prophecies for examples and instruction.

In interpreting the prophets there are many rules to follow and many characteristics to consider, but it cannot be stressed too much that we must always keep in mind the purpose of prophecy, that, is the ultimate goal, which was Christ and His Kingdom, the Church.

The inspired words of Christ or the apostles in commenting on prophecy are sure guides to interpretation. Jesus lived that "all things might be fulfilled" (Luke 24:44). Often he explained how he was fulfilling the law and the prophets, as in the Nazarene synagogue (Luke 4) where he read from Isaiah 61 and told the people that the scripture was fulfilled before their eyes. Some had said that the Isaiah passages referred to the nation of Israel while others pointed out that it could only be spoken of an individual; Christ's words confirmed and completed the correct interpretation. Jesus also showed the fulfillment of Old Testament scriptures not usually regarded as prophecy. For instance, Christ speaks of the stone rejected by the builders (Psalms 118) as being himself, rejected by the Jewish rulers. Yet in the Psalm, the stone is a part of the joy of the Jews in their return. Many of Christ's uses of prophecy were for the purposes of building up the faith of his disciples. Therefore, he quoted the prophecies of the suffering of God's servant and explained the typology of Jonah so that they might believe after those things came to pass. Thus Christ gives us a perfect interpretation of many Messianic prophecies. (Ezekiel 34, Zechariah 11, cf. with John 10).

The interpretation of the Apostles in their early ministry and in the epistles gives us another divine clue to prophecy, (See esp. Acts 3:11-26). Peter showed the fulfillment of Psalms 104 in the upper room; of Psalms 16 in Acts 2 concerning the resurrection of Christ; of Psalms 110 in the exaltation; of Joel 2:28-32 in the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost; and Psalms 118 in Acts 4. Paul shows how the principles in prophecy find a deeper meaning in Christ. For instance, in Romans 9:33 he speaks of the stone laid in Zion as Christ even though "Behold, I am laying in Zion a stone" as written in Isaiah 28:16 had a different and apparently complete meaning to the people of his day. (cf. also Acts 13:29-37) Within their writings, many of the apostles included clarifications of prophecy. Paul used it in Hebrews not just to prove the Messiahship of Christ, but to bring out the fulfillment in Christ and His Church of the Old Testament Law and Prophets.

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SOME PASSAGES IN THE NEW TESTAMENT
WHICH HELP US TO INTERPRET
OLD TESTAMENT PROPHECY

<i>Matthew</i>	<i>Luke</i>	<i>Acts</i>	<i>Romans</i>	<i>Hebrews</i>
2:15	1:68-75	2:16-17	1:1-3	1:1-4
3:1-3	4:17-21	21:29-36	2:28-29	8:7-13
4:13-17	24:25-27	2:34-35	3:21-22	12:18-29
11:4-5		3:11-26	4:16-17	
12:15-21		4:24-30	9:2-8	
15:7-9		8:30-35	9:25-26	
21:4-5		13:23	9:27-33	
		13:29-37	11:7-10	
		13:46-57	11:26-27	
		15:13-18	15:8, 12,	
			20-21, 27	
			16:25-27	

A. *New Testament references to the inspiration of the O.T. Prophets:*

1. Matthew 1:22-23; 24:43 (Psalms)
2. Mark 12:10-11; 12:35-36
3. Luke 15:16; 24:25, 27, 44-48
4. John 10:35; 12:37-41
5. Acts 13:17-46, 47; 15:15-18; 26:22; 28:23-28
6. Romans 1:17; 9:22-26
7. II Corinthians 6:16-18
8. II Timothy 3:16
9. I Peter 1:10-12
10. II Peter 1:19-21

B. *Uses made in the New Testament of the Old Testament Prophets:
(the N.T. Church)*

1. Predict the replacement of Judas, Acts 1:20
2. To substantiate the phenomena of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost as having been planned by God, Acts 2:16
3. To show the predictive nature of the Psalms as to the resurrection of the Messiah, Acts 2:24-25
4. To prove the exaltation to heavenly reign of the Messiah, Acts 2:34-35

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5. To show that all the promises of blessing from the prophets (including Moses) were realized in Jesus, Acts 3:22-26
6. To show the historical reason for the captivity of the Israelites and to teach lessons in N.T. times, Acts 7:42-43
7. To show that the prophets taught that God dwells not in houses made with hands, Acts 7:48-50
8. To illustrate the murderous rebellion of the ancestors of the Jews in killing the prophets who spoke of the coming of the Messiah, Acts 7:52
9. Philip used the prophetic writings to teach concerning Jesus in personal evangelism, Acts 8:32-35
10. To prove that Jesus was the one through whom would come remission of sins, Acts 10:43
11. To establish Christ's death as within the will of God and as the fulfillment of prophecy, Acts 13:27
12. To warn the Jews of rejecting the works of God, Acts 13:40-41
13. To show the Jews that God intended the gospel be taken to the Gentiles, Acts 13:47
14. To prove that Jesus of Nazareth was the Christ, the Messiah, Acts 18:28
15. To testify of prophetic evidence for the Way, and for the resurrection and judgment, Acts 24:14-15
16. To show that apostolic preaching of the death and resurrection of the Messiah and the reception of the Gentiles into the kingdom of God was prophesied, Acts 26:19-23
17. Belief in the prophets is appealed to as reason for believing in Christ, Acts 26:27-29
18. To convince people of the kingdom and of the Messianic office of Jesus, Acts 28:23
19. To convict the rebellious Jews that the hardness of their hearts was prophesied which would result in their rejection by God, Acts 28-25-26
20. To preach that God has always justified man by faith, Rom. 1:17
21. To preach the doctrine that *all* have sinned and are in need of justification, Romans 3:10-18
22. To show the call of the Gentiles into the kingdom of God, Romans 9:25-29; 10:20; 15:12, 21
23. To show the rejection of the rebellious Jews, Romans 9:33; 11:7-8
24. To show the eventual salvation of all *true* Israel, Rom. 11:26
25. To express high feelings of emotion and worship toward God, Romans 11:34

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26. To emphasize and strengthen exhortations, Romans 14:11
27. To emphasize the wisdom of God's revelation contrasted with man's wisdom, I Corinthians 1:19; 2:9
28. To illustrate the victory over death that Christ accomplished, I Corinthians 15:53-54
29. To emphasize exhortations to holiness, II Corinthians 6:16-18
30. To illustrate that Christians are the recipients of the promises made to Abraham and the patriarchs, Galatians 4:27
31. To show the foreknowledge and eternal purpose of God in the New Covenant, Hebrews 8:8-12; 10:16-17
32. To exhort to faith and courage, Hebrews 10:37-38
33. To exemplify faith, Hebrews 11:32-34
34. To show the eternal nature of the regenerate, I Peter 1:24-25
35. To show the nature and mission of the Messiah, I Peter 2:6-8
36. To show the blessedness of the New Covenant, I Peter 1:10-12
37. To show the finality and certainty of the New Covenant, II Peter 1:19-21

Another divine interpretation is the fulfillment of prophecy. Prophecy is fully understood only after its fulfillment. Even the words of Christ were not enough to make the apostles understand his death; they had to see the fulfillment before they comprehended.

If a prophecy remains a puzzle because one cannot find a divine interpretation, then he must employ all devices possible to arrive at the best understanding. He must begin by realizing his own weaknesses and limitations, by praying, and by preparing for a life-long study.

As one strives to understand prophecy, he should use the aids available to him. First, he should study the whole Bible. As a help to this, he should consider the Septuagint, Vulgate, Peshito Syriac, and other early versions for shades of meaning. Paraphrases, grammars, lexicons, and commentaries are of use to the seeker. A study of any connected field such as archaeology and philosophical methods and criticism are also of value.

The Prophet, as preacher, views the present in the light of the future; as foreteller, the future in the light of the present. He points out present sin, duty, danger, or need, but all under the strong light of the Divine future. He speaks of the present in the name of God, and by His direct commission; of a present, however, which, in the Divine view, is evolving into a future, as the blossom is opening into the fruit. And when he foretells the future, he sees it in the light of the present; the present lends its colors, scenery, the very historic basis for the picture.

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This, as we have seen, will help to explain alike the substance and the form of the prophetic message. To the prophetic vision the present is ever enlarging, widening, extending. These hills are growing, the valley is spreading, the light is gilding the mountain tops. And presently the hills are clothed with green, the valleys peopled with voices; the present is merging into the future, although exhibited in the form of the present. The prophet is speaking of Moab, Ammon, Tyre, Assyria; and these are gradually growing into the shapes of future foes, or future similar relations. And in the midst of such references here and there appears what applies exclusively to that Messianic Kingdom which is the goal and final meaning of all, and of all prophecy. It is an entire misunderstanding to regard such prophecies as not applying to the Messianic future, because they occur in the midst of references to contemporary events. As the rapt prophet gazes upon those hills and valleys around him, they seem to grow into gigantic mountains and wide tracts, watered by many a river and peopled with many and strange forms, while here and there the golden light lies on some special height whence its rays slope down into valleys and glens; or else, the brightness shines out in contrasted glory against dark forest, or shadowy outline in the background. And the Prophet could not have spoken otherwise than in the forms of the present. For, had he spoken in language, and introduced scenery entirely of the future, not only would his own individuality have been entirely effaced, but he would have been wholly unintelligible to his contemporaries, or, to use the language of Paul, he would have been like those who spoke always in another tongue.

To make ourselves more clear on these points, let us try to transport ourselves into the times and circumstances of the prophets. Assume that the problem was to announce and describe the Messianic Kingdom to the men of that generation, in a manner applicable and intelligible to them, and also progressively applicable to all succeeding generations, up to the fulfillment in the time of Christ, and beyond it, to all ages and to the furthest development of civilization. The prophet must speak prophetically yet intelligible to his own contemporaries. But, on the other hand, he must also speak intelligibly, yet prophetically to the men of every future generation—even to us. We can readily understand how in such case many traits and details cannot have been fully understood by the prophets themselves. But we are prepared to affirm that all these conditions are best fulfilled in the prophecies of the Old Testament, and that, if the problem be to announce the Messianic Kingdom in a manner consistent with the dogmatic standpoint then reached, the cycle of ideas and historical actualities and possibilities, and yet suitable also to all generations, it could not have been better or equally well

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done in any other manner than that actually before us in the Old Testament. As a matter of fact, the present generation, and, as a matter of history, all past generations—admittedly the whole Jewish Church and the whole Christian Church—have read in these prophecies the Messianic future, and yet every successive generation has understood them, more or less clearly, and in a sense newly. If I might venture on an illustration: the reading of prophecy seems like gazing through a telescope, which is successively drawn out in such manner as to adapt the focus to the varying vision.

And yet the telescope is the same to all generations. We do not propose the clumsy device of a twofold application of prophecy, to the present and to the future, but, taking the prophetic standpoint, we regard the present as containing in germ the future, and the future as the child of the present, so that it can be presented in the forms of the present; or, to revert to a statement in a previous lesson, it is not a progression, or even a development, but an unfolding of the present. Viewed in relation to the Messianic Kingdom, it is one and the same thing, which to the eye of the prophet now is, and ever shall be. We might almost apply to prophetism this statement in the Epistle to the Hebrews: "Jesus Christ, the same yesterday, and today, and forever." Canaan is a prophetic land, and Israel a prophetic people, of whom God says to the world: "Touch not Mine anointed, and do My prophets no harm." And *their* whole history is prophetic. It is not merely one or another special prediction that is Messianic; everything—every event and institution—is prophetic and Messianico-prophetic, and what we one-sidedly call special predictions are only special points on which the golden light rests, and from which it is reflected. And it is in this sense that we understand and adopt the fundamental principle that every event in Israel's history, and every prophecy pointed forward to the Messiah, and that every trait and fact of the past, whether of history or miracle, would be reenacted more fully, nay, in complete fulness, in the times of the Messiah.