

## HOW TO STUDY THE BIBLE

Such systems are based on "grasshopper interpretation," rather than sensible exegesis. So beware the chart and the outline of proof-texts when studying one passage in the light of other passages.

*RULE NO. 6 . . . Use the commentaries.* This must be done *last* if one is to be free to draw his own conclusions without being unduly influenced by what others think a passage of Scripture means. However, it is always helpful, once one has made his own investigation of Scripture, to know what others have learned.

Throughout the entire process of study, bear in mind that the things of God are spiritually discerned. (*I Corinthians 2:10-15*). A prayer for guidance will not make your understanding of the Bible infallible, but it will open up the channels through which the thoughts of God must pass if they are to enter your heart as well as your head. The process of Bible study is the process of thinking the thoughts of God after Him. By following these simple rules, one places himself in a much more advantageous position to hear what God has said.

## CHAPTER II

### WHAT IS A PROPHET?

There is a need at the outset to answer the question "what is a prophet"? The current atmosphere in America evidences two views of this question which are poles apart and mutually contradictory. The one tends to make of the prophet a clairvoyant mystic with some unexplainable insight into future events. A popular magazine recently ran a feature article listing the amazing predictions of half a dozen of the more popularly known clairvoyants and describing their more sensational predictions, (eg. the assassination of President Kennedy, the outcome of future presidential elections, etc.)

The mystic insight attributed to these secular seers is closely akin to the "powers" attributed by certain fundamentalists to the prophets of the Bible. In both there is an exaggerated emphasis upon and concern for the foretelling of future events which makes of the prophet little more than a fortune-teller.

At the opposite extreme is the concept of the Biblical prophet as merely a normal man with *above* normal insights into moral, spiritual and ethical truth. This concept plays down, denies or ignores the futuristic aspects of prophecy, according to the theology of the commentator.

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It would seem that the truth about prophets and prophecy resolves itself to: (1) what did the prophet do, (2) how did he do it, and (3) why did he do it?

We will move a great way toward answering these questions by taking a long look at the word "prophet" itself. As is often the case with key words of Scripture, the translators have chosen rather to transliterate than to translate. Whether this be because such words are often too pregnant to be done justice by a single English word (English is neither a language of religious expression, as is Hebrew, or of philosophic expression, as is ancient Greek), or because the translators are concerned with selling books to widely diverse audiences, the difficulty remains that the word "prophet" is merely a transliteration of the Greek *prophetes*. As such it means nothing to an English speaking reader, excepting as his religious prejudices supply him with a preconceived notion of its meaning.

Since we are presently concerned with the prophets of the Old Testament, who wrote in Hebrew, rather than the New Testament prophets, who wrote in Greek, we must take notice that the Greek *prophetes* (prophet) is used in the Septuagint (the Greek version of the Old Testament popular in the first century) to represent not one but three Hebrew words. Each of these Hebrew synonyms is used, in various contexts, to refer to what our English versions, both Old and New Testaments, call simply by the transliterated "prophet."

*First* . . . "Prophet" is used to translate the Hebrew *roeh*. When this word is used there seems to be some emphasis upon the *means* by which God communicates His message to the spokesman. It is frequently rendered "seer."

*Second* . . . The Hebrew *chozeh* seems to share with *roeh* the concern for the means by which the message of God comes to the messenger. It also is translated *seer* as well as prophet.

*Third* . . . and most frequently used is the word *nabi*. Interestingly, this word means, at its root, "to bubble over." It suggests that the prophet is first himself filled with the Spirit and message of God, and that this filling is so complete that it bubbles over as the spiritual message of God spills out for the benefit of God's people. There seems little justification for the association with this word of the idea of emotional ecstasy. More to the point is Jesus' statement to the woman at the well that ". . . the water that I shall give him shall become in him a well of water springing up (literally, bubbling over) unto eternal life."

Far more than "it shall come to pass," the watchword of the

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prophets was "THUS SAITH THE LORD!" It is claimed for them and by them that "the Word of the Lord came unto" them. (*Isaiab 38:4, Jeremiab 18:1, Ezekiel 20:2, Hosea 1:1, Joel 1:1, Micah 1:1, Zephaniab 1:1, Haggai 1:1.*) The prophet was a man possessed by God. (*I Chronicles 16:22, Psalms 105:15*). More than merely one who spoke for God, he was one *through* whom God spoke. (*Hosea 12:10, Zechariah 7:7, Hebrews 1:1*) His message was not his own. Rather it came directly from God through vision (*II Chronicles 32:32, Isaiab 6, Lamentations 2:9*) and without this prophetic vision the people perished (*Proverbs 29:18*).

It was not the task of the prophet to give counsel and advice. He was rather a bringer of divine command (*II Chronicles 29:25*). It was in this sense that Moses spoke both of himself and The Christ as prophets.

The thunderings of the prophets against sin were not merely those of social reformers who would build a better society, but were warnings of disaster to a people whose disobedience of God's commands threatened not only their ethnic existence but God's own purpose in bringing them into being and sustaining them as a people. (*Nehemiah 9:30*)

It is not surprising that the most succinct statement in the divine record concerning both the prophetic message and its source is to be found in the New Testament. A few moments spent considering this statement in *II Peter 1:20-21* will prove extremely helpful to our present task of understanding the prophets themselves:

Two words come to special attention in this passage. First . . . the word *prophecy*. In light of what has been said concerning the overriding purpose of the prophet, we ought never suppose that the word "prophecy" can be limited to what the prophet said about future events. A prophecy is *any* pronouncement made by a prophet . . . on *whatever* subject.

The term prophecy is derived from the word *prophet*. As mentioned, previously, this word is not generally translated in the English versions, but is rather a transliteration, a mere transposing of letters. Its meaning is obscured rather than rendered by such indirectness on the part of the translators.

In the language of both the New Testament and the Septuagint, (from which the New Testament writers quote) *prophetes* (prophet) is a compound of *pro*, meaning "before" in reference *primarily* to place rather than time, as a speaker stands "before" his audience, with *phemi*, meaning "to declare or report, especially quoting *the words of another*."

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A prophet, then, was one who stood before God's people and spoke God's word. A "prophecy" is anything the prophet said.

*Second* . . . the word Scripture, (*Graphes*) means simply a writing . . . any writing. "Prophecy of Scripture" is simply the written record of the prophet's message.

This recorded message, says Peter, is not a matter of "private interpretation." In this context Peter refers to the *source* of the prophet's message. What he said was not his own interpretation of a given set of historic circumstances and their bearing on the ultimate purpose of God. Rather, "men spake from God, being moved by the Holy Spirit."

By the same token, our understanding of the written account of the prophet's message can never be according to our own views and opinions. It is just here that the most violence is done to the divine record of prophecy by those who would force prophecy, especially those passages dealing with eschatology, into the molds of their own systems.

To say it briefly, the prophet meant what he said. It is our task, through applying the rules of exegesis, to find out what he said rather than trying to make him say what we want him to mean!

There was no greater danger in Israel than that posed by the false prophet. (*Deuteronomy* 13:1-5, *I Kings* 22:22-23, *Isaiah* 9:15) The false prophets taught untruths in the name of God. (*Jeremiah* 14:14) That which they taught was not of God but was their own deceived notions (*Jeremiah* 23:26). They saw false and deceptive visions (*Lamentations* 2:14). Their personal lives were ungodly (*Jeremiah* 23:11), wanton and faithless (*Zephaniah* 3:4). Consequently their prophecy led God's people astray. (*Micah* 3:5).

In brief, the false prophet was the exact antithesis of the true prophet. The true prophet, since he was to be God's spokesman, was first a man through whom God *could* speak. If the false prophet was faithful, in a sense greater than just being "true to God". He was faithful in that he believed God explicitly and trusted Him to do what He promised, or on occasion threatened, to do.

If the false prophet was ungodly, the true prophet was godly. Godliness, as the prophets lived it, was more than mere mortality; it was a constant conscious awareness of a real, contemporary God, which controlled their every thought and act. If the false prophet was wanton, the true prophet was selfless to the point of martyrdom. Indeed, it has been suggested that martyrdom is the identifying mark of the true prophet. It is not true that every genuine prophet was put to death by those to whom he spoke, yet such was so nearly true that Stephen could challenge his tormentors with "Which of the prophets

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did not your fathers persecute? and they killed them that showed before of the coming of the Righteous One . . ." (*Acts 7:52*)

It may be said, that the primary function, perhaps the sole function, of the prophet at the time of the minor prophets was to turn God's people back to God's covenant. (*Nehemiah 9:26*) Whatever was said about the future was intended to accomplish this overriding purpose.

Israel, to whom the prophets were sent, were God's people. Ideally they were a theocracy. Though they were headstrong (Stephen would say stiffnecked) to the point of rejecting God's rule over them to clamor for a king, God still endeavored to rule them as His covenant people.

During the period of the judges this rule was direct. In the period of transition from the judges to the kings it was Samuel who acted as kingmaker; and Samuel, the last of the judges, is also called a prophet.

While the kingdom was united, God still spoke to His people through prophets. The king himself was not exempt. It was the prophet who confronted David face to face with his theft of "the little ewe lamb."

Prophetic activity, in so far as the *writing* prophets are concerned, reached its peak during the period of the divided kingdom. There is a note almost of desperation in the voice of God as He tries again and again through His prophets to recall a people who will not be ruled anymore by Him.

Following the return from captivity, the people, and there were pitifully few of them, persisted in their rebellion against the rule of God. The Old Testament closes with a last plaintive warning of the consequences in the message of a prophet.

The sum of the matter is that from Moses to Malachi, the prophets served as the voice of God, first in the giving of the Law and then in the repeated insistence that God must rule, indeed that He *could* rule only through obedience to His law. *Whatever the prophets said about the future was said in the attempt to motivate God's people to obey Him*, either by holding forth the glories of God's eternal purpose toward which His rule was leading or by stern warnings of the consequences of failure to cooperate, by obedience, in the accomplishment of that purpose.

It must be born in mind, as noted by Jack P. Lewis, that "prophecy is conditional (*Jeremiah 18:5-11*) (when it speaks of the future).

The question must be kept before you: have the conditions of this threat or promise been met?"

## CHAPTER III

### THE COVENANT THEME IN THE PROPHETS

"The Blood Red Thread" which holds the Bible together is the covenant in which God promised to bless all the nations of the earth through the seed of Abraham. To think of the Judaeo-Christian system as "Man's search for God" is to think of a mouse in search of a cat! Not that God is playing cat and mouse, but that the search is so obviously in the other direction. It is God who seeks man, not man who seeks God. Redemption is God's idea, not man's!

The search began with God's cry, "Adam, Where art thou?" (*Genesis* 3:9) The answer came back from Calvary; "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" (*Matthew* 27:46) Both were the cries of anguish from the broken hearts of parent and child.

When the very best Man cried out from the cross it was because He was face to face with the experience of being lost. The ultimate of this experience is death, "the wages of sin." When Jesus was "made sin on our behalf" (*II Corinthians* 5:18-19), He experienced, in our behalf the meaning of "lost."

Whatever God may have done in the eons of time touched so briefly in the first eleven chapters of Genesis, it was the call of Abram in *Genesis* 12:1-3 which set in motion the "Scheme of Redemption" that was to climax at Calvary. In the making of the everlasting covenant, established at this call, God revealed to man the only way back to God by virtue of His unmerited favor made effective through obedient faith.

The covenant was proposed by God, not man. Man can only respond on God's terms. (*Ephesians* 2:8) The heart of the covenant was the promise that through it all the nations of the earth will be blessed in the seed of Abraham. The New Testament identifies that "seed" as Christ, (*Galatians* 3:16) and as those baptized into Him. (*Galatians* 3:27-29)

The theme of the Bible is the history of this covenant, and its fulfillment in Christ, through the new covenant people. It is the record of God's working in the history of His covenant people to "recon-