

TLCBiblical.com Video Lessons
212 - Prophecy, Symbolic Language & Interpreting The Bible
Part 2 - Focal Points In Old Testament Prophecy

1. Introduction

In part 1 of this lesson we identified the overall context of the Old Testament prophets and the impact this has on interpretation. In this lesson we'll take a look at specific areas addressed by the Old Testament prophets and how some of these are misinterpreted. This will enhance our ability to understand the nature and purpose of prophecy and its relationship to God's scheme of redemption. This will also prepare us for a discussion of New Testament prophecy. So, let's get started and take a look at **Focal Points In Old Testament Prophecy**.

5. Filling in the prophetic gaps

In the Old Testament there are many prophecies that use symbolic forms to predict events and describe the actions of God. Other prophecies are more direct and describe events in terms of exactly what will happen. The fulfillment of these can be determined through researching the scriptures and sometimes verified in historical records when it involves nations outside Israel and Judah. On the other hand, there are a number of prophecies that utilize physical objects, events and even people, in a figurative manner. This may be confusing if we don't establish the context of the prophecy and cross-reference it with other passages that will shed light on the meaning and fulfillment. What we need to determine is whether the fulfillment will be of a physical nature or if what is being discussed uses the physical to represent the spiritual. That's a hard concept to grasp and it's the reason why there are misunderstandings of these prophecies that sometimes lead to doctrinal errors.

The areas that fall into this category are:

1. The remnant and future of God's people
2. The Messiah
3. Glory of the future kingdom
4. Changes in God's law
5. Kingship over God's people

An in-depth study of these areas in each of the prophetic books can take a good bit of time. In this lesson I'll summarize the high points and deal with some of the more well known issues. As I noted in the previous lesson, the physical statements concerning the nations have been fulfilled. Those judged by God were destroyed or overtaken by another power. With that in mind we can focus primarily on Judah as the subject of the bulk of the prophecies. We'll start by reviewing common thoughts, perceptions and beliefs concerning Judah and Jerusalem. These can be summarized as:

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1. The land of Canaan was given to the seed of Abraham by God
2. The city of Jerusalem was the center of the kingdom God established physically
3. The Jews were overtaken by the Babylonians in the South and taken into exile
4. God promised to renew and restore the land and kingdom to his people
5. A king would come to sit on the throne of David
6. The kingdom of David would be restored at some point in the future
7. Events related to this will take place in the Middle East signaling the end
8. These events will have a dramatic effect on political and global stability

These Ideas muddy the water for many people and generate confusion. Some abandon trying to understand and decipher the language of the prophetic books altogether. To make matters harder to deal with is the idea that the Bible, especially the writings of the prophets, contain hidden messages or codes that will lead us to critical discoveries. I've stated before that the Bible is a practical book and by placing things in their appropriate context we can resolve many of the interpretive dilemmas we might encounter. There are some things that make reaching this understanding difficult including:

1. Limited knowledge of when the Old Testament era ends and the New Testament begins
2. The notion that the Law of Moses consists mainly of the Ten Commandments
3. That we can draw from the Old Testament scriptures for authority today

In my first series introducing the Bible, I demonstrated that the time period governed by the Law of Moses comes to an end on the day of Pentecost when the church is established. Technically the Law was fulfilled when Christ died on the cross and was raised from the dead. His resurrection ushered in a new era that would introduce a new law. The Law of Moses consisted of numerous ordinances and statutes that covered every aspect of spiritual, social and national life for the Hebrews. The ten commandments were only an introduction to the entire law given at Sinai. As the authority of the Old Testament is voided when the church was established that means that it is incorrect for us draw on those books for doctrinal authority today.

When we try to explain or understand the following points:

1. The remnant and future of God's people
2. The Messiah
3. Glory of the future kingdom
4. Changes in God's law
5. Kingship over God's people

We have to do so taking care to realize that the Law would end and be replaced. The kingdom would be transformed in relation to its physical nature. Let's take a look at each of

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these areas.

6. The remnant and future of God's people

The Hebrew nation was created to fulfill a specific function; bring Christ into the world. The promise was made by God to Abraham who trusted the Lord and who serves as a role model of true faith. God used this nation to create a physical bloodline that the Messiah would be born into. As time moves on, and the kingdom develops, God states that the Messiah will be of the seed of David. God then waited until the time was right to send Christ into the world. It was a time in which the religious leadership taught their own traditions and placed more emphasis on them than they did the Law. When Christ began to teach, they knew he condemned them for their attitudes for which they conspired to have him killed. This was God's plan.

When the Assyrians and Babylonians overtook the kingdoms of Israel and Judah they did so because God had withdrawn his protections and blessings from them. The Northern kingdom was so corrupted by idolatry that they were destroyed and colonized by the Assyrians giving rise to half-bloods who would be hated by the Jews. The Southern kingdom experienced periodic revivals of the worship of the Lord but idolatry continued until there was "*no remedy*" (**2 Chr 36.16**). After seventy years, groups were allowed to return to rebuild the Temple and later the walls of Jerusalem. The expectation on the part of the Jews was that God would one day restore the kingdom as it had been in the days of David. The remnant that returned however wasn't brought back to completely restore the kingdom - they existed to provide the environment for the Messiah to be born into and ultimately offer the final sacrifice for sin.

The idea of the remnant is used both physically and spiritually. The physical groups that returned began to digress from faithful service to God. Idolatry was no longer a problem for them but they neglected the service God expected from them. Malachi addressed their polluted sacrifices, divorce and remarriage, and other attitudes the people had adopted. In contrast there's a spiritual description of the true remnant that would be faithful to the Lord and follow him with their hearts. This is fulfilled in the preaching of the Gospel in the first century and the establishment of the church.

7. The Messiah

God's promise to save mankind from death and the influence of Satan was made in the garden of Eden as consequences were pronounced on Adam, Eve and Satan who appeared in the form of a serpent (**Gen 3**). As the story develops we see the patriarch Abraham become the progenitor of the family that will bring the Messiah into the world. Later when the people of God become a nation they inhabit the land of Canaan containing the city of Jerusalem that God has declared will be where the Messiah will die, the new law will be sent forth from and the

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establishment of the spiritual temple or tabernacle fulfilled in the church.

Throughout the writings of the Old Testament prophets we find references that point to the Messiah. Some of these are plainly stated and correspond to events in the New Testament such as we see in **Isaiah 53**. Others are more subtle such as the statement by Jacob as he blesses his sons that the “*scepter*” shall not depart from Judah (**Gen 49.10**). During the active ministry and writing of the prophets we find physical descriptions and figurative statements about the coming of the Messiah. Perhaps the most well known of these is Isaiah’s prophecy of a sign that God will send. He writes, “*Therefore the Lord himself shall give you a sign; Behold, a virgin shall conceive, and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel.*” (**Isa 7.14**). Micah reveals the birthplace of the Messiah as Bethlehem (**Mic 5.2**) and Jeremiah foretells of Herod’s murder of the children of Bethlehem in a figurative sense as he refers to “*Rachel weeping for her children*” (**Jer 31.15**).

We can compare statements about the Messiah with events recorded in the Gospels and see that they’re fulfilled in the life, death and resurrection of Christ.

8. Glory of the future kingdom

The children of Israel, both in the Northern and Southern kingdoms, broke the covenant the Lord made with them. Moses warned the people and described what was to happen to them when this took place. These descriptions are plainly stated in Deuteronomy and can be compared to accounts of the last days of both kingdoms to show that they took place exactly as Moses said they would. The book of Deuteronomy is not only an encouragement to remember the Lord and follow his laws, but its also a book of prophecy that detailed God’s judgment against his people.

In the writings of prophets such as Ezekiel we see God using images of physical things such as the city of Jerusalem and the Temple as figures of things to come. Isaiah writes in terms of the future kingdom in glowing terms as does Zechariah. Based on statements that appear in the prophets there’s a common misconception that one day God’s people will have a restored kingdom ruled by the Messiah who will have his throne in Jerusalem. The Jews of the first century believed that Christ was sent from God and expected him to restore the kingdom of David and drive the Romans out of the land. The apostles had this same idea as they met with Christ and asked him about it prior to his ascension (**Acts 1.6-8**). Because Christ didn’t establish a physical kingdom like that of David some assume that his mission on Earth was incomplete. Others argue that the church was a substitution for the physical kingdom but as we examine the writings of the prophets we see this isn’t the case.

The kingdom in prophecy is described in terms incorporating physical images at times.

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The idea of the spiritual kingdom is sometimes paired with these physical images. Some of these, such as **Isaiah 11.16, 19.23** and **35.8**, that refer to a highway of holiness that will be in place for God's people are often interpreted literally and applied to events in the Middle East today. If we study the prophets we'll see that these images and others are coupled with the idea of a spiritual remnant that will be gathered together to serve the Lord and the revelation of a new law that will guide them.

As work on the Temple in Jerusalem progressed the people had to be encouraged to complete the task. Haggai uses this temple as a figure that is contrasted with the Temple of Solomon to show that something greater was coming. ***"The glory of this latter house shall be greater than of the former, saith the Lord of hosts: and in this place will I give peace, saith the Lord of hosts."*** (**Haggai 2.9**). The peace spoken of is the reconciliation of all mankind with God and indicates that the fulfillment is to be spiritual not physical. Similar statements are found throughout the writings of the prophets and are frequently interpreted and applied to a physical fulfillment. The fact is, these prophecies have been fulfilled with the establishment of the church. Christ provided information that should end the idea that there will be a physical kingdom when he told Pilate ***"My kingdom is not of this world"*** (**John 18.36**) denoting a spiritual presence, not a physical.

9. Changes in God's law

God's law had been broken by those who had been blessed by the Lord. When it was broken the negative consequences the Lord warned them about were unleashed. The promises God made to save the world through the seed of Abraham and specifically the house of David were going to be kept, but the law would be taken away. Jeremiah states, ***"Behold, the days come, saith the Lord, that I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel, and with the house of Judah: Not according to the covenant that I made with their fathers in the day that I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt; which my covenant they brake..."*** (**Jer 31.31-32**). Other statements appear in the prophets that point to changes in the law.

Isaiah and Micah state that the new law will go forth from Zion and all nations would be gathered and taught (**Isa 2.2-5, Mic 4.1-2**). Figurative descriptions of God's people and this future law are fulfilled in the establishment of the church and preaching of the Gospel to the Gentiles. Physical images appear within visions and other forms but the end result is that they pointed to a time when both Jew and gentile would be called to learn about and worship the Lord

10. Kingship over God's people

David was told that his throne would be established forever. Isaiah states, ***"Of the increase of his government and peace there shall be no end, upon the throne of David, and***

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upon his kingdom, to order it, and to establish it with judgment and with justice from henceforth even for ever. The zeal of the Lord of hosts will perform this.” (Isa 9.7). Other passages mirror this and we can see it fulfilled as Peter speaks of Christ on the day of Pentecost. *“Men and brethren, let me freely speak unto you of the patriarch David, that he is both dead and buried, and his sepulchre is with us unto this day. Therefore being a prophet, and knowing that God had sworn with an oath to him, that of the fruit of his loins, according to the flesh, he would raise up Christ to sit on his throne; He seeing this before spake of the resurrection of Christ, that his soul was not left in hell, neither his flesh did see corruption. This Jesus hath God raised up, whereof we all are witnesses. Therefore being by the right hand of God exalted, and having received of the Father the promise of the Holy Ghost, he hath shed forth this, which ye now see and hear.” (Acts 2.29-33).*

We also have a statement by the prophet Jeremiah that there wouldn't be a king on the throne in a physical sense as he writes about Jeconiah, or Coniah, as he's also known. *“Is this man Coniah a despised broken idol? is he a vessel wherein is no pleasure? wherefore are they cast out, he and his seed, and are cast into a land which they know not? O earth, earth, earth, hear the word of the Lord. Thus saith the Lord, Write ye this man childless, a man that shall not prosper in his days: for no man of his seed shall prosper, sitting upon the throne of David, and ruling any more in Judah.” (Jer 22.28-30).* This coincides with Jesus statement to Pilate that his kingdom was not of this world and from what Peter stated on the day of Pentecost we can determine that Christ is on his throne now and will remain there forever.

A number of figurative images appear in the prophets to describe the reign of the Messiah and we can determine that Christ is the fulfillment of them all. We also see that the reign of the Messiah will be over the Gentiles as well as the Jews as the barriers between people are removed.

11. Old Testament prophecy and the future of Israel

At the start of this study I made note of ideas that are prevalent concerning the future of Israel. There are many who believe that the Old Testament prophets spoke of a time when the kingdom would be restored physically as it was during the days of David. This was an idea that even the disciples had and we see them asking Christ about the subject in Acts chapter one. Let's summarize the most commonly held notions concerning Israel as a nation.

First is the promise that was made to Abraham that the land of Canaan would be given to his offspring as a possession. We find that God revealed that his descendants would be strangers in a foreign land but would return in the fourth generation (**Gen 15.12-16**). This was fulfilled in the events chronicled in the books of **Exodus** and **Joshua** as the children of Israel left Egypt, crossed the Jordan river into Canaan and began the task of conquering it. Some believe that the

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land promise was never completely fulfilled and so the Jews today at some time will be able to claim the inheritance God promised. God stated that Abraham's offspring would have the land from the river Euphrates to the river of Egypt. The Bible reveals that this was indeed fulfilled during the reign of Solomon whose borders extended from the Euphrates to the river of Egypt just as God promised (**1 Kings 4.20-21**). So we can disregard notions that claim the entirety of the land promise was never fulfilled when in fact it was.

Secondly is the idea that the Jews will be able to recover their land and reestablish the kingdom just as it was in the days of David. This is partly in reference to numerous passages that talk about the establishment of the throne of David forever and others. There are two problems with this idea. The main problem is that possession of the land was a gift from God, but it was conditional. In the latter part of the book of Deuteronomy Moses warns the people about what will happen if they follow the idolatrous and evil ways of the nations they drove out. A large part of these warnings aren't just statements to remind them to be faithful, they're a prophecy of what's going to happen to them in the future. Based on a review of what Moses stated in Deuteronomy we can see that there's a pattern to God's delivery of negative judgments against his people. These would take on a particular form and follow a sequence. Coupled with the work of the prophets there would be sufficient indications that they needed to repent and avoid disaster. We can summarize this in part from **Deuteronomy 28** in which Moses pronounces blessings and curses on the nation.

1. (**Deut 28.17-20**) - They would be met with failures in their crops, their cattle and sheep would fail, their ability to have children would fail and they would be troubled in everything they did.
2. (**Deut 28.21-23**) - Pestilence and disease would come upon them. Moses describes these as a consumption, fever, inflammation and extreme burning.
3. (**Deut 28.24**) - Their land would experience severe drought that would consume them and compound the problems they were already experiencing.
4. (**Deut 28.25-26**) - Their enemies would prevail against them and instead of one of the children of Israel putting a thousand of their enemies to flight they would be scattered seven ways and eventually taken out of their land into all nations.
5. (**Deut 28.28**) - The Lord would also strike them with madness, blindness and astonishment of heart so they would be filled with fear and anxiety.

These are only a few of the things that Moses described. There are many more that are

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darker such as a man being betrothed to a wife who would be given to another man. Delicate women would wind up eating their own children because of starvation (**Deut 28.56-57**) and the land would be utterly destroyed because of their sin. These events are recorded in the books of **2 Kings, 2 Chronicles** and **Jeremiah**. Descriptions in these books match the predictions that Moses detailed. But there was also a ray of hope - God would bring them back to the land and restore them if they turned to him with their heart and repented (**Deut 30.1-3**). This is where the problem begins.

There's a lot of confusion over the prophets statements that seem to indicate a full restoration of the nation. There are numerous passages in the prophets that discuss the return of the remnant, the timing for their return and the state of the nation when this happens. We don't have time to deal with all of these but we can take a simpler route and look at what the Lord did and how the promise of restoration was fulfilled.

First, let's take a look at a few statements that provide information describing this.

1. Jeremiah discusses the fact that the people had traded their belief and faith in the Lord for that which was false. Jeremiah writes, "***Hath a nation changed their gods, which are yet no gods? but my people have changed their glory for that which doth not profit.***" (**Jer 2.11**). Jeremiah goes on to describe the goodness of God they had thrown away and the fact that it was their evil that brought these consequences to teach them a lesson.
2. I've already mentioned that the kingship would be taken away. This is stated in a figurative fashion using Jeconiah who is referred to as Coniah in this passage. Jeremiah writes, "***Is this man Coniah a despised broken idol? is he a vessel wherein is no pleasure? wherefore are they cast out, he and his seed, and are cast into a land which they know not? O earth, earth, earth, hear the word of the Lord. Thus saith the Lord, Write ye this man childless, a man that shall not prosper in his days: for no man of his seed shall prosper, sitting upon the throne of David, and ruling any more in Judah.***" (**Jer 22.28-30**). Zerubbabel, the governor of Judah during the days of Ezra and Nehemiah, was a descendant of David but wasn't a king nor appointed as one. From that time forward there were no kings of the line of David just as Jeremiah foretold.
3. Jeremiah also speaks of the fact that the covenant had been broken, the nation punished and as a result God would give them a new covenant. This is a significant statement and one that the New Testament will provide additional information on. Jeremiah states, "***Behold, the days come, saith the Lord, that I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel, and with the house of Judah: Not according to the covenant that I made with their fathers in the day that I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt; which my covenant they brake, although I was an husband unto them,***"

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saith the Lord: But this shall be the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel; After those days, saith the Lord, I will put my law in their inward parts, and write it in their hearts; and will be their God, and they shall be my people. And they shall teach no more every man his neighbour, and every man his brother, saying, Know the Lord: for they shall all know me, from the least of them unto the greatest of them, saith the Lord: for I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more.” (Jer 31.31-34).

There are several points that need to be emphasized from this passage.

- a. The people had broken the covenant with God
- b. Because of this the Lord would issue a new covenant that was unlike the former
- c. In spite of being punished they would be God’s people because of his plan
- d. The faithful would write God’s law on their heart and keep it
- e. Everyone would have access to this new law and know it
- f. The new covenant would come “***after those days***” referring to a future time

The writer of Hebrews quotes this passage and adds an additional element that demonstrates its significance. “***In that he saith, A new covenant, he hath made the first old. Now that which decayeth and waxeth old is ready to vanish away.” (Heb 8.13).*** When God issued this statement through Jeremiah, the end of the Law of Moses was effectively in process. As the Jews were taken into Babylonian exile their worship and practice of the Law changed. The holy convocations in Jerusalem during the year couldn’t be held. They weren’t able to worship in Jerusalem at all which gave rise to the synagogues and reliance on various rabbis or teachers throughout the country. The writer of Hebrews notes that the physical elements of the Law and its practices had been lost in obscurity even in the first century. The writer states, “***Then verily the first covenant had also ordinances of divine service, and a worldly sanctuary. For there was a tabernacle made; the first, wherein was the candlestick, and the table, and the shewbread; which is called the sanctuary. And after the second veil, the tabernacle which is called the Holiest of all; Which had the golden censer, and the ark of the covenant overlaid round about with gold, wherein was the golden pot that had manna, and Aaron's rod that budded, and the tables of the covenant; And over it the cherubims of glory shadowing the mercyseat; of which we cannot now speak particularly.” (Heb 9.1-5).*** As we can see in these passages, the Law of Moses was effectively voided when God stated that a new covenant would be made. With the change of the covenant, everything changed with it.

Other changes would take place as well. The new law would be for all nations not just the descendants of Abraham (**Isa 2.2** , **Mic 4.1-4**). Isaiah states this would take place in the “**last days**” (**Isa 2.2**) which indicates that once the changes foretold were in place, there wouldn’t be any more.

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We can summarize what we've covered concerning what the prophets have to say about physical Israel.

1. They had broken the Law given to them
2. They were removed from the land for a period of seventy years
3. A remnant returned to rebuild the Temple and walls of Jerusalem
4. There would never be a physical king sitting on a throne in Jerusalem
5. A new law would be given by God
6. The new law would be for all nations
7. A new kingdom would be established
8. The ruler of this new kingdom would physically be a descendant of David
9. The new kingdom would never be destroyed

Very simply the new law is the Gospel revealed in the first century. Christ was the Messiah who came into the world and offered himself as the only acceptable sacrifice for the sins of all of mankind for all time. The church is the kingdom that was established on the day of Pentecost and Christ sits at the right hand of God until such time as God declares the end of time and sends Jesus to judge the world. God won't restore Israel as a world power, there won't be a king in Jerusalem and the Jews won't reclaim the land God promised them. The existence of the physical kingdom was conditioned on their faithfulness to God and when that failed their nation was lost, never to rise to the state it once had. The new kingdom established by the son of God is far greater, purer and is eternal.

11. Summary of Old Testament prophecy

We can summarize what we know. The major and minor prophets wrote between around 800 to 400 B.C. Their predictions have all been fulfilled in the events that overtook Israel, Judah, Assyria, Babylon, Egypt and other powers that rose. The coming of the Messiah, the establishment of the church - the new kingdom, inclusion of the Gentiles, the new name Christian being given and the fall of Jerusalem in A.D. 70 closes the book on the Old Testament era prophets. Respecting this limit not only brings clarity to a number of problematic ideas but we'll also develop a better sense of the flow of the narrative and transition to the new law in Christ.

12. Next

Now that we have a framework for prophecy in general, and a good perspective of the Old Testament prophets, we can complete our discussion by comparing this with later writings. In the next lesson we'll take a look at **Prophecy In The New Testament**.