

Ten Dos and Don'ts for Understanding Bible Prophecy

Written by Jerry Griffin

Curiosity Killed the Cat: Little four-year old Mary was driving her mother crazy with questions. All morning long it was, "Why mommy . . . but why mommy?" By midday the exasperated mother had reached her limit. Kindly, she looked down at Mary and said, "Little girls shouldn't ask so many questions. After all, it was curiosity that killed the cat. Now, run along and play." Five minutes later, the mother felt a tug on her skirt. It was Mary: "But, mommy, what did the cat want to know?"

We humans are just naturally curious, and especially so when it comes to the future. "What will tomorrow bring? Will I get that promotion? What about college? Who will I marry? Is a recession around the corner? Should I take an umbrella to work?" Perhaps our need to know is driven by some basic instinct for survival or to gain a sense of control or to ease our fears of the unknown.

Whatever the reasons, we are fascinated with the future, and for Christians the ultimate future holds even greater allure. So, naturally, we want to know the "when" and "how" of the last-days, and in what ways our lives will be affected? But, although these may be legitimate questions, they are *our* questions, and they predispose us to approach the Bible with certain expectations.

First, we expect that the questions we want answered are the very same questions that the biblical writers have addressed. Second, we expect that the purpose of the Old Testament prophets was to predict the future, which is exactly what we want to know about in the first place. Third, we expect that most Bible prophecy is still future—that it's about *us*.

We're not the first generation to make these assumptions. Many before us have done the same with unfortunate results, leaving behind a string of misinterpretations and failed predictions about prophetic scenarios, timelines, and the date of Christ's return. But it doesn't have to be that way. We can clear the air concerning the purpose and nature of the prophetic writings and improve our understanding by following a few simple guidelines. Here, then, are "Ten Dos and Don'ts for Understanding Bible Prophecy."

1. Do understand prophecy's primary purpose. Many think God gave prophecy to satisfy their curiosity about the future and to put them in the know about certain secrets. They see prophecy solely as a prediction tool. Yet less than a third of biblical prophecy involves prediction, and most of that is aimed at ancient Israel and her surrounding neighbors, not at the distant future. Two-thirds of the prophetic message involves calling sinful people to moral behavior and, specifically in ancient Israel's case, calling that nation to honor their God by keeping the terms of the Sinaitic covenant. The purpose for prophecy, therefore, goes beyond *foretelling* to *forthtelling*—that is, a prophet who speaks *forth* with a "thus saith the LORD" to a given people, at a given place and time, about a given moral or religious problem.

Take, for example, the book of Jonah, one of the earliest prophetic books (c. 760 BC). God sent the prophet Jonah to call the wicked city of Nineveh to repentance. But Jonah was reluctant, and after a whale of a detour, he finally entered the city ready to deliver God's message. The message included a prediction: "Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!" (Jonah 3:4). But the important thing to notice is that the prediction was not given to satisfy the Ninevites' curiosity about their immediate future. Nor was it given so Jonah could boast of inside information. Instead, it was a warning, a motivation for the Ninevites to change their ways before it was too late. The prediction was tied directly to their need for repentance. When the people repented, God spared their city.

Prediction, therefore, rarely stands alone in biblical prophecy. More often than not, it is attached to a larger purpose (e.g., to call for repentance or to encourage the faithful in times of persecution). In this way, the prophet's words are more of a teaching tool than a predicting tool.

It is precisely at this point that many interpreters jump the track. They fail to see the relationship between the predictive aspect of prophecy and its larger purpose. Prophecy is much more than predicting events in the distant future or calculating a detailed time-line for the end. As Old Testament scholar, Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., writes: "That was never the purpose God intended when He gave us a view of the future. Instead, His purpose was to assure us that He knows where history is going and to convince us to live in such a way that if He should appear suddenly, we would have no need for excuse or embarrassment."¹

(For more detail on the above point, see Sidebar #1: "Prophecy's Primary Purpose" at the end of this article.)

2. Do recognize the prophetic genre. The form and style of the prophetic writings are different from other parts of the Bible. But even more important, they are very much different from the type of literature we are used to reading today. Most of what we read on a daily basis is written in straightforward prose: newspapers, magazines, novels, letters. This type of writing usually conveys a literal, factual, and linear sequence of information. In contrast, the prophets wrote in a highly poetic and metaphorical style. They too convey facts and information, but do so through word-pictures, rather than modern prose. It is the overall impact and imagery of their words that is important, not the minute details, which so often sidetrack the literal-minded. Like a Picasso or Van Gogh, the prophets paint reality in bold and broad strokes, rather than merely reporting about it in staccato fashion like a TV news anchor.

The careful interpreter, therefore, will become acquainted with the unique literary patterns of the prophets. Not only will he recognize the broad boundaries of the prophetic and apocalyptic genres, he will also notice the various sub-genres: oracles, laments, woes, calls, covenant lawsuits, judgment speeches, visions, prayers, symbolic actions, and connecting narratives. These literary forms are to prophecy what pistons and valves and carburetors are to an engine—they make it go. Therefore, some knowledge of how they work helps guard against interpretational breakdown.

The interpreter should also recognize that much of prophecy is written in Hebrew poetry. In fact, all the prophetic books, except Haggai and Malachi, contain poetry, and some are written almost entirely in poetry (e.g., Isaiah, Jeremiah, Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Micah, Habakkuk, and Zephaniah).

The most important thing to notice in Hebrew poetry is parallelism—the balance of thought from one line to the next. Parallelism generally falls into three categories: 1) *synonymous parallelism*—the second line repeats or rephrases the thought of the first line; 2) *antithetic parallelism*—the second line contains an opposite or contrasting thought to the first line; 3) *synthetic parallelism*—the second line completes or adds to the thought of the first line.²

As an interpretation tool, parallelism helps the interpreter understand the connection between lines and verses, while avoiding overly literalizing the text. For example, in Isaiah 11:4, when the prophet says, "[The Messiah] shall strike the earth with the rod of His mouth, and with the breath of His lips He shall slay the wicked," he is not predicting two separate actions. Instead, he is simply using synonymous parallelism—saying the same thing in two different ways for the sake of emphasis.

In addition to parallelism, the prophetic genre is also rich in figures of speech, word plays, and symbolism. Similes, metaphors, personifications, euphemisms, hyperboles, synecdoches, and metonymies appear almost in every line. The key to understanding the figurative language of the prophets is to read it in terms of its own historical and cultural context, rather than reading into it some twenty-first century concept or cultural connotation.

¹ Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., *Back Toward the Future: Hints for Interpreting Biblical Prophecy* (Baker Book House, 1989), p. 117.

² For more information on parallelism, see the essay, "Making Sense of Old Testament Poetry," in the booklet, *Making Sense of Scripture* (Bible Advocate Press, 1987). To order, contact the Bible Advocate Press by e-mail at bap.orders@cog7.org or call 303-452-7973.

In conclusion, recognition of the various features of the prophetic genre means all the difference in the world between reading one's own ideas into the text and getting the prophet's original message out of the text. Interpreters who ignore these features usually can't see the forest for the trees.

(For more information on "Genres of the Prophetic Writings," see Sidebar #2 at the end of this article.)

3. Do recognize the historical and cultural context. The prophets did not write in a vacuum. What they said and how they said it had a lot to do with what was going on around them socially, culturally, politically, and religiously. Understanding this background puts flesh and bone on a prophet's words. It lets us know the who, what, when, where, and why of the prophetic message.

Imagine a group of people 3,000 years from now reading Abraham Lincoln's Gettysburg Address for the first time. How would they understand those words if they did not know that Lincoln was the sixteenth president of the United States? That he delivered those words on November 19, 1863, at the dedication of the national cemetery on the Civil War battlefield of Gettysburg, Pennsylvania? That the battle of Gettysburg had taken place only four and half months earlier, and that at the time of the speech the war was still raging and its outcome uncertain? Without a basic knowledge of the historical background, almost any interpretation of Lincoln's address would be possible.

The same is true of the biblical prophets. We are almost 3,000 years down line from them. If we are to understand their words properly, then we must read them within their historical contexts. Otherwise, we end up only speculating and guessing about their meaning.

Does this mean that we must have a degree in ancient history? No, but it does mean that we should pay attention to the historical information the prophets themselves mention. Who is speaking? When and where does he speak? To whom does he speak? What is going on to prompt the speech?

It is also helpful to read the prophetic books against the background provided by the historical books of the Bible: Kings, Chronicles, Ezra, and Nehemiah. These books span the period of the prophets and help describe the social, political, and religious conditions which the prophets address.

4. Do recognize the literary context. The literary context has to do with the progression of thought from verse to verse and from passage to passage. How does the prophet develop his point? And how does the point relate to what goes before and after it?

Contrary to popular opinion, the verses of the Bible are not a series of one-liners, each with an independent meaning of its own. Instead, the Bible should be read like any other book—by units of thought. When the Bible is picked apart in piecemeal fashion—a line from here and a line from there—it loses its continuity. This is especially true when reading the prophets. Their writings contain a completed picture, one that has already been properly arranged by the prophets themselves. The words of the prophets are not a box of jigsaw puzzle pieces that we must somehow arrange for ourselves. When we take verses out of context, we end up with our own disjointed creation, rather than the arrangement already placed on the page.

From time to time it may be helpful to compare verses from one prophet with another. But first, each verse must be understood within the meaning of its own context before it can be properly matched with a similar verse from a like context. In this way, apples are matched with apples, and oranges with oranges, thus preserving the overall continuity and integrity of each prophet's message.

5. Do distinguish between unconditional and conditional prophecies. Unconditional prophecies are those that are the sole responsibility of God to perform. No human actions or other contingencies are required. For that reason the list of unconditional prophecies is relatively short. Included are God's covenant with Abraham (Gen. 12:1-3); God's covenant with David (2 Sam. 7:12-16); God's promise of a new covenant (Jer. 31:31-34); and God's promise of new heavens and a new earth (Isa. 65:17-19; 66:22-24).

In contrast, the vast majority of Bible prophecies are conditional. Their fulfillment is contingent upon human response. The "blessings and cursings" chapters of Leviticus 26 and Deuteronomy 28 provide the foundation for conditional prophecy. In these chapters, God promises blessings upon Israel if the people obey the covenant commands, but punishment if they do not. The principle of conditional prophecy is also clearly stated in Jeremiah 18:7-10:

If at any time I announce that a nation or kingdom is to be uprooted, torn down and destroyed, and if that nation I warned repents of its evil, then will I relent and not inflict on it the disaster I had planned. And if at another time I announce that a nation or kingdom is to be built up and planted, and if it does not obey me, then I will reconsider the good I had intended to do for it (NIV, emphasis added).

The easiest way to recognize conditional prophecy is to look for the words “if” or “unless” in the wording of the prophecy, as highlighted in the above passage. Many times, however, these words will not be explicitly stated, but nonetheless implied. This has led many to mistake conditional prophecies for unconditional ones. In such cases, if the prophecy can be responded to by an act of human choice (obedience, repentance, or even defiance), then the prophecy is clearly conditional. For example, at first glance, the prophecy Jonah delivered to Nineveh appears to be unconditional: “Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown” (Jonah 3:2). No *ifs*, *ands*, or *buts* are stated. Destruction seems certain. Yet, after hearing the prophecy, the Ninevites repented, and God spared the city. The unfolding of the story makes it clear that Jonah, the Ninevites, and God all understood the promised destruction to be contingent upon the city’s response.

6. Don’t be concerned with extra-biblical questions. The problem comes, however, when we try to make prophetic passages answer specific end-time questions that the biblical writers do not address. When we do this we cloud the passages with our own concerns, instead of focusing on the original concerns of the prophets.

For example, in 1 Thessalonians 4:16, 17, the apostle Paul mentions a “rapture” in connection with Christ’s return. Some have used this passage for all sorts of speculation about the end times, including the so-called “secret rapture” theory in all of its pre-, mid-, and post-tribulation forms. Those things may pique our curiosity, but Paul’s purpose for writing was not intended to give modern readers detailed information about the rapture. His interest was more pastoral than eschatological, as verses 13-18 indicate.

In reality, Paul was responding to a specific concern in the newly organized Thessalonian church—namely, why some of the members had already died before seeing Jesus return. (Most first-century Christians commonly believed and expected that Jesus would return within their lifetime.) Paul’s answer, therefore, has more to do with clarifying the Thessalonians’ understanding of death and resurrection than it does with end-time speculation. At Christ’s return, Paul says, the Christians who have already died will not miss out. Instead, they will have the privilege of rising to meet Christ in the air before the living do. The Thessalonians, therefore, were to comfort one another with this hope (v. 18).

However, when preachers today use 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18 to speculate about the rapture, they not only go beyond Paul’s intent, but also set themselves and their followers up for the pain and disappointment of misinterpretation. For example, during the 1840’s, the followers of the William Miller Advent Movement learned firsthand about the disappointment that comes from imposing extra-biblical concerns on the text. The Millerites, as they were called, were convinced that Christ’s second coming was just around the corner. They had been persuaded by the teachings of William Miller, a sincere Baptist minister from upstate New York.

Although Miller did not claim to know the exact day or hour of Christ’s return, he had calculated the approximate year—sometime between March 21, 1843 and March 21, 1844. Behind Miller’s calculation, however, was the assumption that the Bible must surely contain a mathematical formula for predicting the end of the world. Miller believed he had found such a formula in Daniel 8:14. The verse speaks of a cleansing of the temple sanctuary after 2300 days. Miller interpreted the sanctuary to be the earth; the cleansing to be the return of Christ; and the 2300 days to be 2300 years, beginning in 457 BC and concluding in 1843.

Miller, however, overlooked the fact that the chapter itself outlines an entirely different interpretation. In verses 15-26, the angel Gabriel makes Daniel understand that the prophecy concerns the rise of the Greek Empire and what will happen to the Jewish people and their temple sanctuary under a specific Greek ruler.

Instead of looking for the intended meaning of the text, Miller had unwarily inserted his own agenda with disastrous results. Many of Miller’s followers quit their jobs, left their crops in the field, sold their possessions, and waited for the Lord’s return. When the Lord did not return in 1843 or in the revised date of 1844, the Millerites became a laughingstock across the country. To his credit, Miller admitted his error and abandoned the movement. And many of his followers did the same. But a good number did not. Instead, they only compounded Miller’s original mistake by reinterpreting his data to form a number of faulty doctrines that still persist to this day.

The drive to map out the end of time is as strong today as it was in William Miller's day. However, as the Millerites learned, the questions we so often want answered are not always the pressing concerns of the biblical writers. As Joel Green puts it, "The Bible simply leaves open many questions about the end. The Christian hope—that God will consummate history, fulfill His purpose, and bring salvation to His people—is solidly based in the Scriptures. But seeking an exact schedule by which all this happens is an extra-biblical pursuit."³

7. Don't expect every prophecy to be literal. Remember that much of the language is figurative and symbolic, and sometimes even fantastic. For example, when we read in Revelation 13 of a beast having seven heads and ten horns, with the body of a leopard, feet of a bear, and mouth of a lion, we easily recognize that no such beast literally exists. The description is symbolic.

The same is true when we read in Isaiah 11:1 that "there shall come forth a Rod from the stem of Jesse, and a Branch shall grow out of his roots." We do not envision limbs and leaves literally sprouting from the body of a biological mutant. We understand immediately that this is the prophet's poetic way of saying that a Messiah shall come from the lineage of Jesse, the father of King David.

Yet not every figurative passage is so easily recognized, especially those dealing with the last days. There is the tendency, or perhaps even the desire on our part, to take prophecies about the future in a literal way.

A classic case in point is Matthew 24:29: "Immediately after the tribulation of those days the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light; the stars will fall from heaven, and the powers of the heavens will be shaken." Instead of recognizing this as poetic language borrowed from the Old Testament prophets, many have taken this passage literally.

For instance, during the Advent Movement, many Millerites pointed to contemporary solar and lunar eclipses and several meteor showers as the actual fulfillment of this verse, and hence a "sign" that the second coming was just around the corner. But solar and lunar eclipses are quite common and are not actually a ceasing of the sun and moon's light. And meteors are not stars, but specks of cosmic dust. If the Millerites had truly taken this passage literally, then they should have expected the sun and moon to stop shining altogether. They should have also expected all the stars, which are hundreds and even thousands of times larger than the earth, to drop totally from the sky, obliterating the earth in the process. But is a complete cosmic disaster or even a naturally occurring eclipse or meteor shower what the language of Matthew 24:29 originally had in mind?

When we carefully compare the language of this passage with other prophetic statements, we soon see that it is no different in function than the poetic language used in Isaiah 11:1 or in any other figurative passage. In fact, we find the same poetic language regarding the sun, moon, and stars used in Isaiah 13:10 to describe the fall of ancient Babylon; in Ezekiel 32:7, 8 to describe the fall of ancient Egypt; and in Joel 2:30, 31; 3:15 to describe the fall of the nations in the last days. Each time this reference is used in the Bible, it is symbolic of the political, social, and religious upheaval that occurs when a nation or power falls. Therefore, in the context of Matthew 24, the same language forecasts the destruction of Jerusalem and the Jewish temple in AD 70. Figuratively speaking, the devastation of the Jewish state and homeland by the legends of Rome was truly an "earth-shaking" event. For the residents of Judea at the time—both Jew and Christian—it was as if the sun and moon had gone out and the stars had fallen over their lives.

8. Don't read modern definitions or ideas into a prophet's words. Let each biblical writer determine the meaning of his own words. Don't put words into his mouth by introducing ideas that are completely foreign to his life and times. That is not interpretation but impersonation. Whenever we force our definitions on the prophet's words, we end up exchanging the original point for some off the track, often silly, prediction.

For example, some have seen in Nahum 2:4 a prediction of modern automobiles and traffic jams. The verse says: "The chariots rage in the streets, they jostle one another in the broad roads; they seem like torches, they run like lightning." Yet, in context, this verse is not a cryptic "sign of modern times." Instead, it is describing the military siege and destruction of the ancient city of Nineveh.

³ Joel Green, *How To Read Prophecy* (InterVarsity Press, 1984), p. 28.

A similar misreading of a prophet's words occurs in Daniel 12:4, where Daniel is told to "shut up the words, and seal the book until the time of the end; many shall run to and fro, and knowledge shall increase." Because the verse mentions "the time of the end," many modern readers have assumed that the words "run to and fro, and knowledge shall increase" are descriptive of the speed and extent to which people now travel the globe and of the great explosion in scientific knowledge that marks our modern era. But, once again, the words have more to do with the topic of discussion in Daniel than with some off-handed prediction of modern life. To "run to and fro" is a common biblical expression akin to Amos 8:12: "They shall run to and fro, seeking the word of the LORD, but shall not find it." The expression, therefore, indicates searching for divine guidance. By the same token, the phrase, "knowledge shall increase," refers to the information that Daniel was told to seal in the book. In other words, the entire verse suggests that people will search to understand the things sealed in this book, but will not fully know what they mean until the time of their fulfillment, i.e., "the time of [their] end."

Another verse that has been modernized is Luke 21:26, which speaks of "men's hearts failing them from fear." In the last days, modern interpreters tell us, men's hearts will fail them, and the high rate of heart attacks we see today is a direct fulfillment of this verse. Yet the majority of heart attacks today are caused by bad diet and poor health habits. It's clogged arteries that are killing people today. The "failing (or literally, *fainting*) hearts" in Luke 21:26 result from the "fear" of the catastrophic events spoken of in the text.

9. Don't apply all predictive prophecy to the future and dismiss its historical fulfillment. So much of what passes today as prophetic interpretation is nothing more than making the Bible fit what is currently happening in the world. The assumption of many interpreters is: "If it fits or seems reasonable, then it must be correct." These interpreters act as if the main concern of the prophets was to predict events in the far distant future, namely our own day. It's flattering to think that the whole of Bible prophecy centers around us, that our generation will be *the* special generation to see the Lord return. But every generation since the first century has thought it was the last.

To see almost every prophecy as a prediction of some event or condition of the twenty-first century is to sever the prophetic message from its historical roots. Remember that most Old Testament prophecy involved *forthtelling*, not *foretelling*. Its primary purpose was instructional and motivational, calling on the people to turn from evil and obey their God. Also remember that when the prophets spoke, they were addressing a given people, at a given place and time, about a then existing moral or religious problem. Therefore, when they did announce the future, it was usually the *immediate* future of Israel, Judah, or the surrounding nations, rather than *our* future.

In fact, over 90% of all Old Testament prophecy is aimed at the immediate historical situation. Less than 2% is messianic, less than 5% describes the new covenant age, and less than 1% concerns events still to come.⁴

These figures are upsetting to some people because they are not as sensational as claiming that Bible prophecy is being fulfilled with every newspaper headline. But if one must depend upon constant prophetic titillation to get his religious juices going, is he or she any different from the "evil and adulterous generation" of Jesus' day who were always "seeking a sign?" The biblical writers offer many signs from the past. How many more does one need?

10. Don't believe everything everyone says about the future. Jesus warned his generation, "Beware of false prophets" (Matthew 7:15). And today it is no different. Outside of religious circles, there are astrologers, psychics, and new-agers that claim predictive powers. And if that were not bad enough, within religious circles there are self-proclaimed prophets, outright fakes and charlatans, assorted wackos, empire-building crowd pleasers, ego-tripping speculators, and even sincere but misinformed prophetic amateurs—all who claim some special insight into Bible prophecy. Their theories run the gamut from "88 reasons why Christ will come in 1988" (remember that one?) to the claim that the United States is the New Jerusalem of Scripture because the middle three letters of Jerusalem are USA. The climate is such that anyone with a newsletter and an ax to grind can gain a following.

How then can we separate the wheat from the chaff? First, put the prophet and his theory to the test. Deuteronomy 18:22 says, "When a prophet speaks in the name of the LORD, if the thing does not happen or come to pass, that is the thing which the LORD has not spoken; the prophet has spoken it presumptuously;

⁴ Gordon Fee and Douglas Stuart, *How To Read The Bible For All Its Worth* (Zondervan, 1982), p. 150.

you shall not be afraid of him.” The false prophet and his followers have mistaken their own thoughts and desires for divine revelation. They have failed to be like the Bereans, who “searched the Scriptures daily to find out whether these things were so” (Acts 17:11). Therefore, when any interpreter makes a claim that does not come to pass, be on guard. If he does not clearly admit his mistake, but tries to deny, hedge, or justify it, then don't follow him. He has proven himself to be an untrustworthy guide.

Second, judge the interpreter on how well he has followed the basic rules of interpretation. Has he taken into consideration the literary style (language, words, and forms of expression) of the prophets? Has he paid attention to the historical background of biblical passages? And has he interpreted passages within the context of surrounding verses and chapters? If the interpreter consistently falls short in these areas, then take what he says with a grain of salt.

Third, avoid theories based on fear and sensationalism, rather than on a careful examination of the biblical text. These usually amount to nothing more than a save-your-own-skin type of gospel.

Finally, in spite of all the erroneous and competing ideas, don't be discouraged. When reading Bible prophecy, keep your eyes on the big picture—the broad and primary storyline of the text—and you'll get the main message.

Scripture quotations for this article are from the New King James Version, unless otherwise noted.

Sidebar #1: Prophecy's Primary Purpose

Today, the common idea of a prophet is someone who foretells or predicts the future. Therefore, it's generally assumed that the main purpose of the biblical prophets was to predict events far distant from their own day. But just how accurate is that assumption?

The biblical word "prophet" literally means "one who speaks forth." In the Old Testament, the role of the prophet was to "speak forth" to his contemporaries on behalf of Israel's covenant God, Yahweh. And that's literally what they did—they *spoke!* They delivered their messages to the people of *their day in person and orally*. We call these oral messages *oracles*.

Over the years, ancient Israel had hundreds of prophets. We read about some of them in the narrative books of the Old Testament, prophets like Samuel, Elijah, Elisha, Gad, Nathan, and Huldah. The record tells us about them, but does not preserve their oracles to any great extent. However, in the 17 prophetic books of the Old Testament, the situation is reversed. The oracles of those prophets have been preserved, but not as much is said about the prophets themselves.

It is precisely the spoken nature of these prophecies that causes most of our difficulties in understanding them. The prophetic books, especially the longer ones like Isaiah and Jeremiah, are essentially a collection of the spoken oracles of a given prophet. But here's the catch. The oracles are not always in chronological order, their historical settings are not always given, and it's not always clear where one oracle ends and another begins. And on top of that, they are presented in poetry—in the form of Hebrew songs. It's like having an ancient recording of the greatest hits of the prophets on a CD with a randomly selected play list.

In addition to the spoken nature of the prophetic message, we must also understand its context and content. Yahweh had entered into a covenant with Israel through its first great prophet, Moses. In Leviticus 26 and Deuteronomy 28-32, Israel was promised blessings if they remained faithful to the covenant, but cursings if they did not. The "blessings and the cursings" were the means by which Yahweh enforced the covenant and held Israel accountable. This is where the prophets come in. The "blessings and cursings" chapters are the foundation of their message. They were Yahweh's *covenant enforcers*, reminding Israel of the covenant law and the consequences for obedience or disobedience. That's why so many of the prophets went to the northern tribes of Israel. The northern leaders and tribes had abandoned the worship of Yahweh in favor of other gods. They were in clear violation of the covenant, and the prophets called on them to repent and return, or else face punishment at the hand of Yahweh.

Thus, the core of the prophetic message was to point *back* to the covenant, *back* to Sinai, rather than to point forward to the distant future. Contrary to the common misconception, the prophets were *forthtellers* more than *foretellers*. The emphasis was on speaking forth with a "thus says the LORD" to instruct Israel, much more than on foretelling or predicting the future.

To put this in perspective, over two-thirds of the prophetic material is forthtelling. It is aimed at correcting a moral or religious problem in ancient Israel, calling on the people to repent and return to the covenant. Less than one-third involves prediction, and most of that is aimed at ancient Israel and her surrounding neighbors, not at the distant future. In fact, about 92% of all Old Testament prophecy (forthtelling and foretelling combined) is aimed at the immediate historical situation of ancient Israel. About 7% points to the messiah and the new covenant, and only 1% concerns events still to come—the consummation of the age.

However, lest we be misunderstood, prediction does play an important role. But here's how. The predictions were tied to the forthtelling. The prophets warned that if the people did not heed the forthtelling, then they could expect punishment, which in Israel's case usually meant invasion and exile at the hands of a foreign power, such as Assyria or Babylonia. In most cases, however, the prediction of punishment was conditional upon Israel's response.

Sometimes the prophets extended their predictions concerning Israel's punishment and exile. After the punishment had run its course, Yahweh, still faithful to his part of the covenant, would restore the nation. Also, the foreign powers that had invaded Israel would themselves be destroyed. And to make the restoration complete, a new king or messiah would be anointed to sit on the throne of King David, thus reviving the golden age of Israel's past glory and ushering in a kingdom of prosperity and peace.

These predictions of punishment and restoration served several specific purposes. 1) The predictions of punishment drove home the prophet's call for repentance and illustrated the consequences of Israel's unfaithfulness. 2) The predictions of restoration encouraged and comforted the people during the course of the punishment by giving them hope of a better day ahead. 3) The predictions of destruction for the invading powers demonstrated to Israel that Yahweh was a universal God, sovereign over all nations, not just Israel. 4) Overall, the predictions served to strengthen the faith of the believing community as events unfolded. But never were any predictions made for the purpose of satisfying human curiosity about the future.

Sidebar #2: Genres of the Prophetic Writings

According to the calculations of J. Barton Payne, 27% of the Bible is prophecy. To be exact, out of 31,124 total verses, the Bible contains 8,352 prophetic verses, covering 737 different topics.¹ That's a good hunk of the Bible, and more often than not the most misunderstood hunk. But it doesn't have to be that way. We can improve our understanding by acquainting ourselves with the literary structures (or genres) of this material.

The bulk of the prophetic genres are found in the last 17 books of the Old Testament from Isaiah to Malachi. This material is home to a variety of unique literary forms, the most important of which are listed below.

Oracle: a spoken message by a prophet. This is a major category under which fall the different varieties of speeches. Oracles are everywhere. Example: Hosea 5.

Covenant Lawsuit: an oracle in which the prophet presents Yahweh's case against an individual or group for violating the terms of the covenant. As the name suggests, it follows the pattern of a courtroom lawsuit. There's a summons, a charge, the evidence, and a verdict. Example: Isaiah 3:13-26.

Judgment Speech: an oracle that pronounces Yahweh's judgment on an individual or group for a specific transgression. The structural pattern is: the prophet's commission to go and present the judgment, the messenger formula ("thus says the LORD," which indicates that the prophet is not delivering his own words, but representing Yahweh), the accusation or transgression, and the judgment. Example: 1 Kings 21:17-19.

Woe Oracle: a prediction of doom on an individual or group. The word "woe" was cried out by ancient Israelites in the face of some distress, like disaster or death. The structural pattern is: an announcement of distress or "woe," the reason for the woe, and a prediction of doom. Example: Micah 2:1-5.

Promise or Salvation Oracle: an announcement of restoration for an individual or group. The pattern is: a reference to the future, a statement of radical change, and a statement of blessing. Example: Amos 9:11-15.

Lament: an oracle expressing sorrow or mourning, a funeral dirge. Example: The Book of Lamentations, the prophet Jeremiah's acrostic funeral dirge for the fallen city of Jerusalem.

Prophetic Call or Commissioning: a narrative account of the call or commission that a prophet received from God. The pattern is: a confrontation with God, a commissioning, an objection by the prophet, a reassurance to the objection, and a sign. (This pattern is consistent throughout Scripture, from the call of Moses to Gideon to Isaiah, even down to Paul in the New Testament.) The call usually comes at the beginning of the prophet's career or writings. Pay careful attention to it, because it reveals the prophet's mission (to whom and for what purpose the prophet was called), thus helping to put what follows in perspective and to aid in its interpretation. Example: Jeremiah 1:4-10.

Symbolic Action: a narrative account of an action performed by a prophet to illustrate a point. Typically, the pattern is: God's command to perform an action, a report of the action, and its interpretation. Symbolic actions are a special feature in the Book of Ezekiel. Examples: Ezekiel 4, 5, and Jeremiah 19.

¹ J. Barton Payne, *Encyclopedia of Biblical Prophecy: The Complete Guide to Scriptural Predictions and Their Fulfillment* (Harper and Row, 1973), pp. 631-82.