

# Prophecy

When considering the concept of prophecy in scripture, there are several questions that are important to consider:

## **What is prophecy?**

Is it always speaking about the future?

Is it always from God?

## **Why is it recorded?**

Should it affect the way we live?

## **How should we interpret it?**

Can it have more than one interpretation?

Is it always fulfilled? Can it be fulfilled more than once?

To answer these questions we need to consider the examples of prophecy that God provides:

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## **What is a prophet?**

### **Exodus 7**

Usually when we think about prophets we think about them as coming from God, but this is a really useful example because Aaron is described as a prophet to Moses. Here Moses is like God to Aaron and Aaron is like a prophet to Moses.

From Exodus 4:16 we can get some more insight into what this means; God gives the words to Moses, Moses gives them to Aaron, and Aaron says them. Aaron is in the place of Moses mouth. He doesn't have his own ideas about what to say, or his own interpretation of the words, he simply repeats the words Moses gives him.

This is made really clear when looking at the interaction between Moses and Pharaoh later in Exodus. The account describes Moses speaking directly to Pharaoh, rather than through Aaron (e.g. Exodus 8:9). This shows that when a prophet speaks it is as if the person they are prophesying for is speaking; prophets are the mouths of their masters.

### **Ezekiel 2:4-5**

When the lord Yahweh sends Ezekiel to the children of Israel, he tells him what to say. Part of what he is to say is "Thus saith Yahweh". This seems to be sufficient evidence that the people would know that there has been a prophet among them. Simply claiming that your words are from another source shows that you are a prophet (of course you may not be a true prophet!).

A prophet can therefore be defined as someone who claims to be speaking someone else's words.

### **Jeremiah 20:9**

Jeremiah's experience of speaking the word of Yahweh resonates with this definition. Jeremiah is unable to prevent himself speaking the words of Yahweh, despite all the trouble it brings him. He experiences the word like a fire in himself that he cannot stop himself from saying.

### **Jeremiah 26:2**

In a similar vein, Yahweh commands Jeremiah to "diminish not a word" of all that is revealed to him. (A command he keeps in verse 8). This demonstrates the direct nature of prophecy; the prophet does not change the words they receive, they simply repeat them.

### **2 Peter 1:20**

This repeats the point again; prophecy doesn't come from the will of man but from God. This has implications for how we should understand prophecy, which will be considered later.

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## **How do we know if a prophecy is true**

### **Deuteronomy 13:1-5 & 18:22**

These two chapters give us some tests to determine whether a prophet is from God: If a prophet makes predictions that do not come to pass, then they are not from God.

Nevertheless the reverse is not necessarily true. It is clear that if a prophet seeks to turn people away from God that they should not listen to him, but put him to death. There are two ways of understanding this. Either:

1. The prophet is able to make accurate predictions because he is from God, but yet he is able to rebel against God to turn the people away from him
2. The prophet is able to make accurate predictions by chance, and so deceive the people turn them away from God.

Both of these alternatives seem plausible, but in either case the message is clear; if the revelation of a prophecy is not consistent with the message we have already received from God then we should reject it.

## How is prophecy revealed?

### Numbers 12:1-8

Moses is different from Aaron and Miriam in the way that God reveals himself to him. God reveals himself to Moses mouth to mouth, and “apparently”. This is in contrast to how he reveals himself to less prophets, like Aaron and Miriam. God usually reveals himself to a prophet in:

- A vision (v6)
- A dream (v6)
- Dark speeches (v8)

Moses is exceptional in being such a prophet. The only examples of people who are greater than a prophet are:

- Moses (Deuteronomy 34:10)
- John the baptist (Matthew 11:9)
- Jesus (Deuteronomy 18:15)

This demonstrates several things. Not all prophets are the same; God reveals himself to some more clearly than others. Also, some prophets receive their vision or dream in “dark speeches”. In these cases the meaning isn’t immediately clear; there is a need for the prophecy to be interpreted.

### Jeremiah 20:9

Having suffered at the hands of Pashur for prophesying the words of Yahweh, Jeremiah determines not to speak in his name any more. However he is unable to contain the words; they are as a burning fire shut up in his bones. This picture of the way that God reveals himself through his prophets shows that the words that they say are not coming of their own will. God gives them the words to say and they can’t prevent themselves from saying it.

### 2 Peter 1:19-21

Peter reminds his readers that prophecy doesn’t come by the will of man, but through the movement of the Holy Spirit.

Peter also reminds them of the nature of interpretation; although it is clear that some prophecies require interpretation, the interpretation belongs to God (Genesis 40:8); not from our own minds. also 2 Peter 1 - not by the will of man

## **What is prophecy like?**

### **Numbers 11**

When Moses appoints the seventy elders to help him judge the people, God puts some of the spirit which he has put on Moses onto these elders. When Yahweh puts his spirit onto these elders, they prophesy. This demonstrates an important feature of true prophecy - that it comes by the spirit of God.

Moses, who has experienced the outpouring of God's spirit for longer than these elders, is not envious of this sharing of the power of prophecy. He says "would God that all the LORD's people were prophets" (v27). This is a sentiment shared by Paul in his letter to the Corinthians.

### **1 Corinthians 14**

The context of this part of Paul's letter is to teach the Corinthians about the relative merits of each of the gifts of the spirit and how each should be used. He says that prophecy is what they should be aspiring to (v1, v5). The reason for this is clear; speaking prophecy edifies, exhorts and comforts the church, rather than just the speaker (v3, v4). This connects to what Paul says later about how many people should be speaking; when it comes to the gift of tongues, the number is restricted to "at most three", whereas those who prophesy are **all** encouraged to speak. This echoes what Moses says in Numbers 11:27.

This shows the value of prophecy; it is something to aspire to and it has value to those who listen to it. We should remember this when we read it.

### **General observations**

We have many examples of prophecy recorded for us; there are long books full of it (Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel etc.). Very often these prophecies are specific. They relate to a specific circumstance, and a particular time; usually there are specific consequences. For example Jeremiah 28 - this prophecy written to Babylon has a specific timescale and detailed events.

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# Why is it recorded?

## General observation

One reason often stated for a prophecy being given so that “they will know that I am Yahweh” (e.g. Eze 6:14, Eze 7:27, etc.). This connects with what God says to Ezekiel back in chapter 2; if he tells the people that he is speaking words from Yahweh then they will know that there has been a prophet. If they hear those words then they hear the words of Yahweh.

The idea that “they will know that I am Yahweh” takes this one step further. The words revealed in prophecies show the hearers who Yahweh is and what he is like. Perhaps this is one reason why prophecy is so often focussed on the future. Yahweh’s name and purpose concerns the future - “I will be who I will be”. By revealing what the future will be, he is showing his purpose and his character.

## Deuteronomy 13 & 18

These chapters have already been considered above, but they are also relevant to the question of why prophesy is record for us. Prophecy can be used to provide evidence that the prophet is from God. By extension we can see that prophecy in scripture can provide evidence that the words are from God, if those words come to pass.

## 1 Corinthians 14

As noted above, prophecy is useful to edify, exhort and comfort the church.

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# Is prophecy always about the future?

While there are many examples of prophets speaking things that are not about the future, there are no examples (that we have found) where a **recorded** prophecy doesn’t contain some element of speaking the future.

There are some examples where a prophecy contains lots of other things apart from future predictions; speaking about the past, and what has happened, but these always end up turning their focus towards a future resolution. (e.g. Ezekiel 34)

There is at least one possible exception to this in Ezekiel 37:9. This is a prophecy to the wind: “Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe upon these slain, that they may live”

While this looks like it is not speaking about the future directly, it is still implicit in the nature of the words that are said; the end of the phrase could be translated “and they will live”. This prophecy is saying to the winds that if they breathe upon the slain that the slain will live, so it is concerned with a change that will happen in the future. This kind of prediction often seems to be implicit in the word of God. Since God knows the end from the beginning and speaks of things that are not as though they were.

Prophecy is given so that people know “that I am Yahweh” (see Ezekiel 6 above). God is revealing himself, and his plan, and that is a plan for the future which is why prophecy is so often looking towards the future. This is what it is to “know that I am Yahweh”.

Another observation which connects with this is that the Greek word for prophet is formed of two words, from which we get the our English word:

G4253 πρό - meaning “before”

G5346 φημί - meaning “speak”

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## How should we interpret it?

### **2 Peter 1:19 - 21**

Peter compares prophecy to light, shining in a dark place; we should feel confident that prophecy is there to be understood, to help us see more clearly. Prophecy comes from the spirit of God, rather than the will of man. This connects back to Numbers 11, where God’s spirit causes the elders to prophesy.

The implication of these two features of prophecy (that it helps us see, and is from God) is that prophecy cannot have a “private interpretation”. God caused prophecies to be written and they have a specific intended message. When we try to understand them we need to think about what God’s intention is, rather than our own ideas of what a prophecy might mean.

### **What does it mean for a prophecy to be fulfilled?**

When an Old Testament prophecy is referred to in the New Testament it is often said that the prophecy is fulfilled. There are two different words used to describe this idea of “fulfillment”.

One instance which is instructive is Matthew 13. In verse 35 we learn that Jesus spoke in parables to “fulfill” Psalm 78:2. (Aside: this makes Asaph a prophet). Later in chapter Jesus tells a parable about the kingdom of heaven being like a net, which becomes “full”. The work for “full” here is the same as “fulfilled” in verse 35. One aspect of what it means for a prophecy to be

“fulfilled” is that it becomes “full” like a net with fish. This suggests that we should expect prophecies to be entirely true, not only parts of them.

### **Can a prophecy be fulfilled more than once?**

Earlier in Matthew 13:14, we see how those who heard Jesus but didn't understand him fulfill the prophecy of Isaiah 6:9-10. This prophecy is originally given to Isaiah and seems to relate to his own experience of prophesying to God's people. However it is also true of Christ's experience. This suggests that sometimes a prophecy can be fulfilled more than once.

### **Partial Fulfillment**

When Jesus reads another portion of Isaiah's prophecy (Isaiah 61) in Luke 4:18-19, he quotes only the first one and a bit verses. He stops before he reaches “the day of vengeance of our God”. Jesus states: “This day is this scripture fulfilled in your ears”.

Yet if we keep reading Isaiah 61 we see that there are parts of this prophecy which do not apply to Christ's first coming, and will only be fulfilled when he returns. This is an example of a part of prophecy which is fulfilled, when other parts are not yet fulfilled. (See also John 19:37)

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### **Should it affect the way we live?**

Understanding prophecy, and how it applied to him seems to influence some of the decisions Jesus makes; including giving his life. (For example speaking in parables, see above.) An example of this is Matthew 21:1-4, where Jesus makes commandments about how he wants to enter Jerusalem in order to fulfill prophecy.

It is possible that Joseph the husband of Mary, was also aware of prophecy in the choices he made; in Matthew 2:23 we learn that he dwelt in Nazareth so that Jesus could be called a Nazarene.

Paul charges Timothy to use prophecy to help him in his life (1 Timothy 1:18). Jesus warns his disciples to flee to the mountains when they see the abomination of desolation stand in the holy place; by listening to the words of Jesus prophecy these disciples would have been saved.

We should do the same. By trying to understand the prophecies God has given us we can understand more about the time we are in and the events we can anticipate in the world around us, and this will help us to make wise decisions in our lives, in accordance with God's will.