

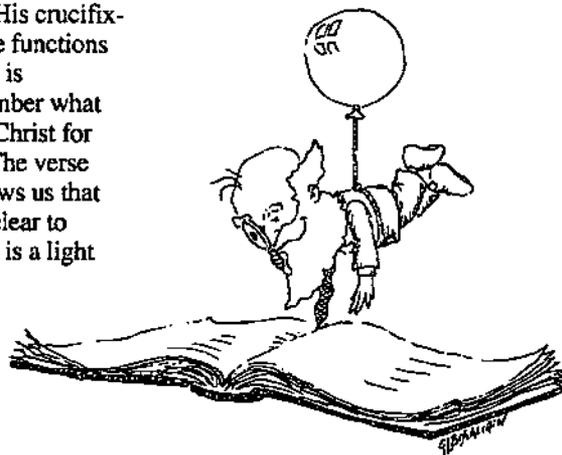
A person does not have to read his or her Bible very extensively to notice that it contains a sizeable amount of material that may be classified as prophecy. But, what is the source and purpose of these prophecies? How are we to understand and relate to them? Prophecy is pervasive through the Old Testament, from beginning to end. As soon as Adam and Eve disobeyed and were expelled from the Garden of Eden, God promised them the coming of a Saviour (Genesis 3:15). Later God warned Noah about a flood that would affect the entire world (Genesis 6). Several major prophecies were given to Abraham, the physical and spiritual father of Israel; for example, the Egyptian sojourn of his descendants. The other end of the Old Testament contains the words of prophets such as Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi.

"But," some might say, "that's just in the Old Testament." Not so. A brief look at the New Testament shows that prophecy is common here, too. This section of the Bible begins with prophecies of the births of John the Baptist and Jesus. John, who announced the Messiah's coming, was considered by Jesus the greatest of prophets. Jesus Himself concluded His ministry with the great prophetic sermon on Mt. Olivet. It took a prophetic-like vision to teach Peter that Gentiles were to become part of the church (Acts 10). Paul recorded his prophetic experiences in his first letter to the Corinthians and his second letter to the Thessalonians. The most obvious example is the major prophetic book at the close of the New Testament, Revelation. Therefore, one cannot escape the phenomenon of prophecy by simply stating, as one Protestant denomination does, "We are *New Testament* Christians."

Origin and Functions

Why is prophecy so widespread throughout the Old and New Testaments? A simple, yet revealing initial answer to this question is, "Because God wanted it that way." This answer emphasizes the divine source of prophecy. A prophet does not work him- or herself up into an ecstatic state and then "break into prophecy." The prophet served at God's will, not vice versa, as is illustrated by Balaam's story (Numbers 22-24). Thus, the first point that can be made about the origin of prophecy is, as 2 Peter 1:21 puts it, "Holy men of God spake as they were moved by the Holy Ghost" (KJV).

In the upper room before His crucifixion, Jesus mentioned one of the functions of prophecy. When a prophecy is fulfilled, we are able to remember what He told us and thus recognize Christ for who He really is (John 16:4). The verse from 2 Peter quoted above shows us that although the future may be unclear to others, for Christians prophecy is a light that provides hope in the face of uncertainty about the future. God's messengers also spoke to their own societies issuing warnings and calls to repentance.



Making Sense of Bible Prophecy

Application: Present and Future

When should the words of the prophets be applied? Did they only speak to their own time and people? The words of the prophets cover a continuum through time. The first time frame for the prophet's messages is the present. Many of the prophets' indictments of the people's sins come under this category, a prominent example of which may be seen in Amos 2:6-16. His prophecy is not meant for the future, except perhaps as a general warning of the results of that type of persistent behavior. This aspect of the prophetic ministry, speaking for God to a current situation, is sometimes called *forth-telling*.

by
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However, the prophet could also speak to issues in the intermediate or distant future. This is sometimes referred to as *fore-telling*. As God gave His prophets inspired views or words about the future, He spread out before them events ranging from those immediately at hand through to eternity.

If the biblical prophets only predicted events that were to occur in their near future, they might be suspected of simply being better guessers than their contemporaries, as some humanistic scholars believe. However, God extended the view of the biblical prophets to events well beyond what they could speculate. An example of prophecy on an intermediate scale is the length of time that the Jews would be captives in Babylon, which Jeremiah placed at 70 years (Jeremiah 25:12).

The prophecies about the nations found in Daniel 2 and 7 present a fascinating example of predictions ranging over many centuries. From a human point of view, Daniel seems to have chosen the least likely alternative for the destiny of the Persian empire in which he lived, but from a divine point of view he was conveying exactly what God foreknew.

Failed Prophecies

Prophecies dealing with events cast in a long-length time scale have sometimes focused upon the end of human history. We refer to them with a term drawn from Greek. They are *eschatological* prophecies—those dealing with “the last things.” We know that the New Testament refers to events that will occur during the end time, particularly in connection with the second coming of Christ.

However, we should also recognize an Old Testament eschatology. Although not as clear, these prophecies are found in the books of all the major prophets (for example, Ezekiel 40-48) and in most of those written by the minor prophets. These prophecies have common elements. They begin with the prophet’s circumstances, commonly the Babylonian exile, then look beyond immediate events into the future. There, the prophets were shown what ancient Israel could have become. They

saw God’s people returning to their glorified land. Jerusalem was seen as an exalted city, the world capital into which peoples from all nations would flow to become acquainted with the true God and His purposes for them, and thus enter into a covenant relationship with Him as the Jews had. The exaltation of this land and the entire world would continue until it would become a virtual New Earth itself.

Unfortunately, these prophecies about ancient Israel were never literally fulfilled. “What happened?” you may ask. There are three views of prophecies concerning the restoration and exaltation of Zion. The humanistic view claims the prophets were not really recipients of divine foreknowledge and simply guessed wrong. The extreme opposite view is the intense literalism that is characteristic of evangelical interpreters known as dispensationalists who believe that, since these are prophecies inspired by God, they must take place in the literal, present country of Israel.

Seventh-day Adventists have taken a different approach to these prophecies, falling between these two stances. Like the evangelicals, we believe these “failed” prophecies are true, given by God to His servants the prophets, but we agree with the humanists that these prophecies will not be literally fulfilled in Israel.

How can we reconcile these two points of view? By considering these prophecies as conditional. Taking Ellen G. White’s lead who said that “the promises and threatenings of God are alike conditional” (*Selected Messages*, book 1, p. 67), we have considered these prophecies promises of what could have been if God’s chosen people had cooperated fully with His plan for them. Unfortunately, they did not. We see the final failure of this plan in the New Testament when God’s own people reject His Son: “He came to his own home, and his own people received him not” (John 1:11, RSV). While these prophecies will yet be fulfilled with the new and spiritual Israel (Galatians 3:15-29), they will not be fulfilled for the literal earthly Israel.

Apocalyptic Prophecy

The kind of prophecy that leads up to and finds its final fulfillment in New Testament eschatology is called *apocalyptic*. (The other kind of prophecies are typically termed *classical*.) Coming from the name for the book of Revelation, the word *apocalypse* refers to the revealing of

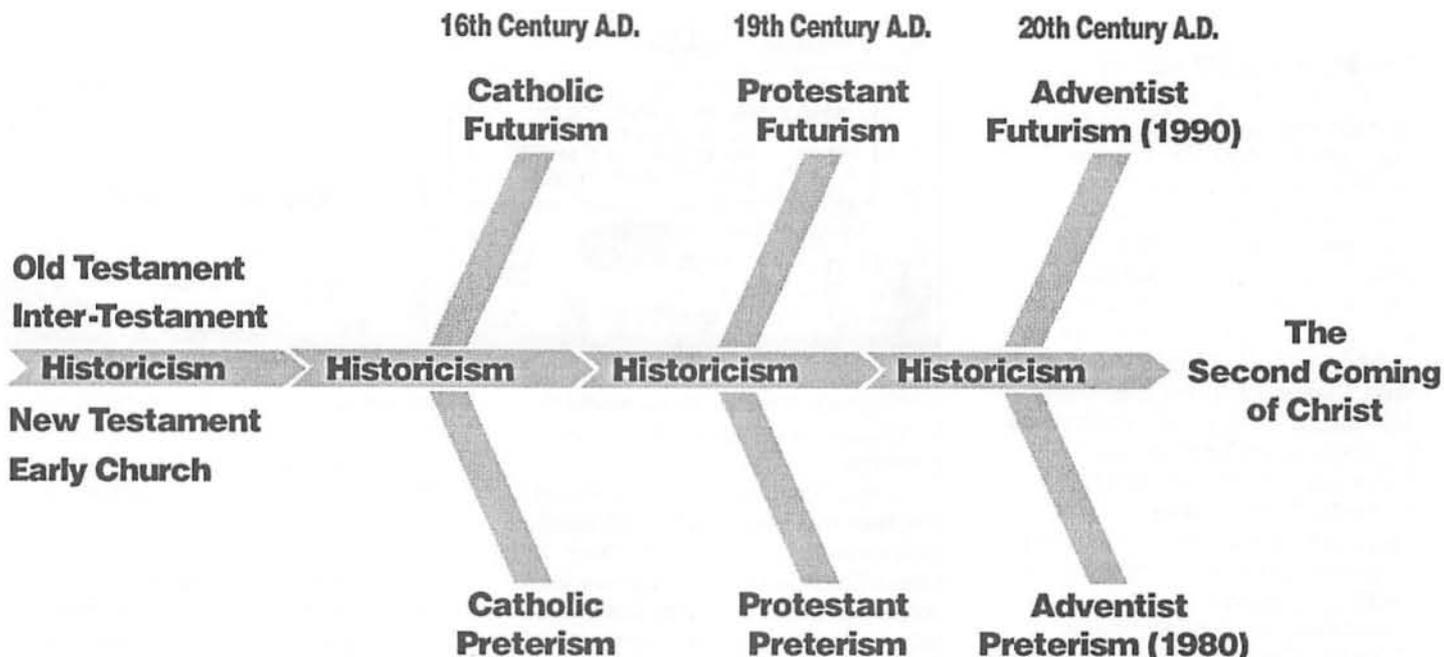
something of the future, in this case the end of human history as we know it. Appropriately enough, a major exemplar of this type of prophecy is the book of Revelation. Because of its obvious similarities to Revelation, the book of Daniel is also commonly classified as apocalyptic. Passages such as Isaiah 24-27, Zechariah 9-14, and Matthew 24 are sometimes placed in this category as well.

Apocalyptic prophecy is identifiable by a number of characteristics. There is a more common use of visions in apocalyptic than in classical prophecy. Apocalyptic prophecy also features an intense use of symbols. While classical prophecy commonly refers to immediate issues, apocalyptic prophecy more frequently deals with the distant future. Apocalyptic prophecy often intensely contrasts good and evil, sometimes symbolized by light and darkness, as seen, for example, in Revelation’s description of the great controversy between Christ and Satan. Prophets also mention an interpreting angel who helps the prophet understand what God has shown him.

Preterists, Historicists, and Futurists

One difference between classical and apocalyptic prophecy is that the latter tends to reveal the details of events leading to the end time, while classical prophecy may reveal only an occasional intermediate stage leading to the great consummation. However, some scholars deny that apocalyptic prophecy encompasses this sweep of the ages. They have branched off into other types of interpretive schools of thought.

The *historicist* interpretation sees apocalyptic prophecies as revealing human history in continuous fashion; that is, the prophecies in Daniel and Revelation present the great sweep of the future from the prophet’s time to Christ’s coming kingdom. Strong evidence for this can be found in the major series of symbols extending through the centuries in both Daniel and Revelation. Daniel 2 and 7, for example, present a series of metal and animal figures that symbolize kingdoms that will succeed one another until the eternal kingdom of God is set up (the stone of Daniel 2) or until the time when the saints of the Most High enter the eternal kingdom of God (in Daniel 7). Daniel 11 and 12 repeat the pattern, describing the actions of individual rulers along the way.



Thus, there is strong internal evidence from the books of Daniel (and also in Revelation) that these prophecies were intended to give their hearers and readers a view of the sweep of history from God's vantage point. However, there are those who have denied this historic point of view. If one does not apply them through the course of history, there are two alternative places where one can look for their fulfillment: mostly in the past, or mostly in the future.

Preterists, who apply the book of Daniel in the past, see its prophecies ending in the 2nd century B.C., in the time of Antiochus IV Epiphanes, a Greek king who ruled in Syria. Since he was a cruel king who did evil things to the Judean Jews, he is seen as the fulfillment of the bad things that were to happen to God's people. From this point of view, the book of Daniel was not written in the 6th century B.C. as future prophecy. Instead, it was written in the 2nd century B.C. while these events were happening. It is thus not prophecy, but rather history written up as prophecy by an unknown author.

For *futurists*, the prophecies did begin during the prophet's own time, but then the great prophetic clock stopped. There was a gap, and major segments of human history—such as Christ's ministry and the early Christian church—have simply not been addressed by prophecy. Futurists

ascribing to the dispensationalist position are waiting for the prophetic clock to start up again. When it does, they will count down the final seven years of earth's history (the 70th week of Daniel 9) during which there will be a final literal and personal Antichrist who will appear in Israel and persecute the Jews for three-and-one-half years. The church, having been raptured out of the world, will leave the Jews to be persecuted by this Antichrist and his followers. These final seven years will end with the second coming of Christ (actually the third coming for them). Thus, for the futurists, the great sweep of the Christian age is only represented by a gap: prophecy did not address it at all.

Selecting a Position

Which of these interpretations is right—the historicist, the preterist, or the futurist? To firmly establish a final answer to that question would require us to go through all of the prophecies in detail, and that would take more than a few issues of *Dialogue*.

Let's just observe a few things. We have noted, from the internal evidence of these prophecies, that they extend through history. However, the preterist provides a truncated view of God's activity in history: He appears quite uninterested in humans since the 2nd century B.C. (Daniel) or the 1st century A.D. (Revelation). The futurist

faces the same problem, but claims that all these prophecies belong to this time alone; God did not speak to any other part of the Christian Age through the prophetic voice.

The historicist school of interpretation disagrees, saying that God's prophetic voice has continued to speak to all ages. Just as the Old Testament has provided us with a history from Creation to the end of the Old Testament era, so these apocalyptic books provide us a panoramic view of our Christian era, as God has spoken to it in advance through the prophetic voice.

Bible interpreters of the late Old Testament through to the early Christian church can be classified as historicists. Although they saw that major portions of these prophecies awaited fulfillment, they themselves were part of a continuum. The Protestant Reformers were also distinctly historicist. One of the events they observed was the activity of the "little horn" (Daniel 7:7-26), which they identified with the papacy in Rome.

Quite naturally, papal scholars saw things differently, and attempted to parry the Reformers' thrust during the Catholic Counterreformation in the latter half of the

For Further Reading

For a general study of the prophets and their message for their times, see Abraham Heschel, *The Prophets: An Introduction*, 2 vols. (New York: Harper and Row, 1962). For a general but comprehensive review of all biblical prophecies written from a conservative viewpoint see J. Barton Payne, *An Encyclopedia of Biblical Prophecy* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker, 1980). For a Seventh-day Adventist viewpoint on restoration prophecies about Israel see Hans LaRondelle, *The Israel of God in Prophecy* (Berrien Springs, Mich.: Andrews University Press, 1983). For the most recent studies of apocalyptic prophecy by Seventh-day Adventists consult the *Daniel and Revelation Committee Series* in 7 volumes (Silver Spring, Md.: Biblical Research Institute, 1982-1992). See especially chapters 8 and 9 in volume 3 on conditional prophecy and fulfillment of prophecy.

16th century. In 1590, Francisco Ribera of Spain published a lengthy commentary on Revelation in which he denied the Protestant interpretation and applied the prophecies in the future. Meanwhile, a Spanish interpreter named Luis de Alcazar introduced the preterist interpretation into Catholic circles.

Similar developments did not occur in Protestantism until considerably later. The first preterist approach to the book of Daniel in Protestant circles came with Anthony Collins' commentary published in 1726. Up to this time, almost all prominent Protestant interpreters were historicists. With the inroads of rationalism, humanism, and liberal thought in the

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19th century, however, many mainline Protestant denominations drifted toward preterism.

Futurist interpretation of apocalyptic prophecy was introduced by an Englishman named John Darby in the 1820s, at the time William Miller was preaching the prophecies of Jesus' coming from a strongly historicist point of view.

At present, preterist views are held mostly by the liberal mainline Protestant denominations, while futurist views are found especially among conservative evangelicals. The historicist interpretation of prophecy has continued, however, through the teaching and preaching of Seventh-day Adventists. In a sense, our church stands virtually alone as the heir of the Reformers' interpretation of Bible prophecy. Details of these relations have been spelled out by Leroy Edwin Froom in his monumental four-volume work, *The Prophetic Faith of Our Fathers* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald, 1950-1954).

Dual Interpretation

What occurred in Catholicism in the 16th century and in Protestantism in the 19th century is now being repeated in certain sectors of Adventism. In the early 1980s, a controversy over prophetic interpretation developed in the Seventh-day Adventist Church. At that time, preterism was offered as an alternative to historicism. Under the label of "dual interpretation of prophecy," people were told they could keep their historicist view, "adding" preterism to it. Under these conditions, however, true historicism fades away. After holding a major study conference in 1980, our church rejected preterism. The world delegates assembled for study in Glacier View, Colorado, affirmed their adherence to the biblical and historic views held by the founders of Adventism, who saw themselves as a prophetic movement, raised up at a certain

time to announce specific prophetic truths for this particular time.

Currently, a special kind of futurism is being offered to Adventists in much the same way preterism was a decade ago. It suggests that various prophecies of Daniel and Revelation should be applied, *en masse*, to the future. Again, with this proposed application, the historical view of Bible prophecy is in reality discarded.

Controversy is not necessarily bad, if it leads us to examine the basis of our convictions. In so doing, rich new studies of prophecy have been produced by Adventist scholars over the last decade. However, these two alternative views also challenge us to study Bible prophecy seriously, so that we may understand it for what it really teaches. When we do that, we can stand with our feet firmly planted on the foundation of prophetic truth on which the Seventh-day Adventist Church was raised.

In summary, prophecy in the Bible may be seen to have great importance as shown by the amount of attention given to it by the inspired writers and by Jesus Himself. Each Seventh-day Adventist bears the responsibility for studying and sharing the unfulfilled prophecies of Daniel and Revelation so that others can understand where we stand in the flow of prophetic time and its historical fulfillments.

Much time has elapsed since these Bible prophecies were given. That means we have almost reached the end of time as we know it. Maranatha! May we be ready for Christ's soon coming. □

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