Interpreting Old Testament Prophecy

1. Introduction

a. Today we will look at how Old Testament prophecy relates to our functioning as the church under the New Covenant. It's a bigger subject than it appears to be at first sight.

b. There is a relationship between prophecies spoken in ancient times that are recorded in the Old Covenant, and events recorded in the New Testament that tell us how those prophecies were fulfilled at the coming of Jesus.

c. We have the written Word of God in the form of our bibles. In 66 books we have a written account of the whole revelation of God to mankind, in the form of historical narrative, poetry and prophecy. Each one needs to be approached differently so as to understand what the author is saying, and how we should understand them in their context.

   i There is an artificial division between Old Testament and New Testament. It implies that the Old Testament is somehow inferior to the New, so mentally we make a subtle distinction between the two.

   ii But they are a consistent whole, and should be viewed as such. The New Testament would make no sense without the Old, and the Old Testament would be incomplete without the New.

d. The revelation we have in scripture is progressive. The first 11 chapters in Genesis are most important for us to understand because they lay the foundation and give us a God-centred context for what follows.

   i Although God's revelation is progressive, the layout of our bibles is not, so the progressive thread of that revelation has to be unravelled. The historical narrative parts of the bible are relatively easy to track in terms of time; the same is not so for the poetry and the prophetic books. The prophetic books are all found together at the end of the Old Testament, and are divided into Major and Minor Prophets, with little indication of where they fit chronologically.

e. First we need to establish context, because that helps us to know what was in the mind of the writer. Part of understanding context is to establish where the passage fits in to the time-frame of this progressive revelation; then we know what has gone before and where this passage fits in to the plan of God's redemption.

   i A good commentary can help to give an outline of the book or passage and can help to unravel some of its prophetic language. I recommend the commentaries by Dr. Thomas Constable – he has covered every book of the bible, and they are freely available online – www.studylight.org, or search for Constables commentaries.

   ii Alternatively, David Pawson's book "Unlocking the Bible" is very good for an overview of each book.

f. The bible is the revelation of God's purposes for the whole of humanity and the whole earth. It is focused on the relationship between God, humanity and the earth. After sin entered the God judged the corruption and wickedness of mankind in the flood, reducing the population of the earth down to just 8 people.

   i Then comes Babel, resulting in a world of nations, cursed, divided and scattered over the face of the earth. God establishes covenant relationship, first with one man, Abraham, then through his family into a nation, Israel.

ii God's choosing of Israel and the promises of a land given to them are then set in the context of God's ultimate purpose for the salvation of humankind and the recreation of the earth itself. Israel became the tool by which God demonstrated his plan for all the nations of the earth.

iii This was a first stage in the development of the people of God, then national and territorial Israel in the Old Testament was a stage toward the development of an international and global people of God.

iv It is into this context that God raised up prophets to declare his purposes.

Genesis 3:15 *"I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel."*

2. How do we interpret the Prophets?

a. The Old Testament prophets were speaking from both a Christological and eschatological perspective. What they spoke was centred on the person of Christ and his ultimate purpose in coming to the earth as the second Adam and to establish his kingdom rule.

b. Sometimes they were addressing a near and local focus, at other times speaking of things that were far distant, in a future age. And sometimes it was a mixture of the two, so we need ways to help us understand what the author meant by his words in his context.

i There are times when a prophet uses illustrative language to highlight what he is saying. We must be careful that we don't look for a literal fulfilment of every prophetic word, but to understand what was in the mind of the prophet.

c. The writer to Hebrews tells us this:

Hebrews 1:1-2 *Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, [2] but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son…*

i He says that something has changed. In the Old Testament, God's normal way of speaking to the people was through the prophets; they spoke at many times – they were speaking throughout the Old Testament period; they spoke in many ways, meaning – the way they spoke was consistent with their own character, it was not formulaic.

ii No single prophet had the full picture. They all saw in part and prophesied according to the part they saw.

iii Now things have changed. God has spoken by his own Son, and he has the last word. Jesus has now appeared on the scene, he has made sense of, and brought to completion, much of what the prophets were speaking into.

d. We must read the Old Testament prophecies in a forward-thinking way. Old Testament revelation prepares us for what was to happen in the New. Prophecy undergoes a change when its fulfilment passes from one age to another.

i If the prophecy applies only to Old Testament times, and finds its fulfilment in it, it will be fulfilled according to Old Testament principles.

ii If the prophecy is fulfilled only in the New Testament, we must disregard any restraints or conditions of the Old Testament or the times when the prophet lived and seek fulfilment in line with the spirit of the New Testament and the historical conditions of that time frame.

iii If the prophecy is capable of several fulfilments, any fulfilment in the time of the Old Testament will be in line with the spiritual conditions of that time frame. Fulfilments that fall within the New Testament and beyond will be in line with the prevailing spiritual conditions at the time of fulfilment.

e. An example: the first three chapters of the prophet Hosea concern Israel's adultery against God. God outlines his complaint against them; Hosea fathers two children who are named "No mercy" and "Not my people". In the middle of chapter 2 God turns towards Israel with tenderness and outlines his plans for her restoration; the chapter concludes with these words:

Hosea 2:23 *And I will have mercy on No Mercy and I will say to Not My People 'You are my people'; and he shall say, 'You are my God'.*

i The context tells us that the fulfilment of this prophecy only concerns the nation of Israel, and if it had found its fulfilment entirely in the Old Testament, it would only apply to that group of people. But when we look at the New Testament we find something interesting.

1 Peter 2:9-10 *But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvellous light. 10 Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.*

Romans 9:24-26 *…even us whom he has called, not from the Jews only but also from the Gentiles? 25 As indeed he says in Hosea, "Those who were not my people I will call 'my people,' and her who was not beloved I will call 'beloved.'" 26 "And in the very place where it was said to them, 'You are not my people,' there they will be called 'sons of the living God.'"*

f. How can Peter and Paul apply a prophecy that clearly concerns the nation of Israel and apply it to the church? The answer gives us a clue as to how we should approach Old Testament prophecy as members of the New Testament church.

i The apostles viewed the Old Testament from a Christological perspective. They approached the Old Testament with an understanding that Jesus was the fulfilment of the covenants and therefore the theology of the Old Testament. Everything in the Old Testament was pointing towards Jesus.

ii In his introduction to his first letter Peter makes sure his readers are aware of the importance of the Old Testament prophets in laying the foundation of the gospel.

1 Peter 1:10-12 *Concerning this salvation, the prophets who prophesied about the grace that was to be yours searched and inquired carefully, 11 inquiring what person or time[a] the Spirit of Christ in them was indicating when he predicted the sufferings of Christ and the subsequent glories. 12 It was revealed to them that they were serving not themselves but you, in the things that have now been announced to you through those who preached the good news to you by the Holy Spirit sent from heaven, things into which angels long to look*

iii Paul says something similar in his opening words to the book of Romans:

Romans 1:1-4 *Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God, 2 which he promised beforehand through his prophets in the holy Scriptures, 3 concerning his Son, who was descended from David according to the flesh 4 and was declared to be the Son of God in power according to the Spirit of holiness by his resurrection from the dead, Jesus Christ our Lord…*

g. Both said that a knowledge of the Old Testament prophets was fundamental to their writings, taking those ancient prophecies and applying them in their own timeframe. They regarded

their writing as a continuation of what the prophets had spoken, now enhanced and given greater substance by the life, death and resurrection of Jesus.

i From other passages of scripture written by Peter and Paul, we see they also viewed the Old Testament with an eschatological perspective. They saw the prophets of the Old Testament all contributing to a dialogue heading towards the "Great and Awesome Day of the Lord." All the promises are fulfilled in the last days by the coming of the Lord.

h. With regard to the Hosea passage, the apostles do not ignore what the text says; they take full account of its historical nature and content.

i But something significant had changed since Hosea wrote those words. The Holy Spirit has been poured out on the newly-emerging ekklesia. Initially this pouring out of the Holy Spirit appeared to be only on Jewish believers, but then in Acts 10 we read this:

Acts 10:44-45 *While Peter was still saying these things, the Holy Spirit fell on all who heard the word. [45] And the believers from among the circumcised who had come with Peter were amazed, because the gift of the Holy Spirit was poured out even on the Gentiles.*

i. Suddenly the words of Hosea 2:23 – "I will have mercy on No Mercy and I will say to Not My People 'You are my people'" – brought the revelation that God was now including Gentiles in his plan of redemption.

i It is this theological principle that is uppermost in the apostles' minds as they write their letters. God's mercy and grace are extended to the Gentiles as well as to the Jews.

ii In the Old Testament there are several prophecies that point towards the nations coming to share in the experiences, privileges and hopes of Israel.

Isaiah 56:6-7 *And the foreigners who join themselves to the LORD, to minister to him, to love the name of the LORD, and to be his servants, everyone who keeps the Sabbath and does not profane it, and holds fast my covenant— [7] these I will bring to my holy mountain, and make them joyful in my house of prayer; their burnt offerings and their sacrifices will be accepted on my altar; for my house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples.*

Ephesians 3:4-6 *When you read this, you can perceive my insight into the mystery of Christ, [5] which was not made known to the sons of men in other generations as it has now been revealed to his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit. [6] This mystery is that the Gentiles are fellow heirs, members of the same body, and partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel.*

iii The authors of these Old Testament prophecies could not have known either the circumstances or the impact of the ultimate fulfilment of their words.

j. This is not to say that Israel no longer has a primary place in God's plans and God's affections – they certainly do. Paul explains this in the phrase that he repeats several times in the book of Romans, "To the Jew first, and then to the Gentiles."

i In Romans 9 he explains that alongside physical Israel who alone can inherit the specific promises that apply to them as a nation, there is also a "spiritual Israel" who receive the gift of righteousness based on their faith in God.

ii We need to be careful, there are some prophecies in the Old Testament only physical Israel can fulfil. There are other prophetic words giving us insight into the heart of God; as Gentiles we can draw on these promises.

k. There was more in what the prophets were prophesying than they themselves realised. As the time comes for each prophecy's fulfilment, the Holy Spirit brings revelation of the counsel of

God to bring about the substance of what the prophet spoke in partial and incomplete words centuries before.

3. Prediction or Promise?

a. There is one further area that needs clarification. Many look at the Old Testament prophets and regard their words as purely predictive. But there is another way of looking at these prophetic passages, and that is to see them as declarations of promise.

   i There is a difference between prediction and promise. Prediction is a statement that is detached from any involvement by the reader; it is purely an event-based outcome of the statement being made, with little or no personal involvement in the fulfilment.

   ii Promise presupposes, initiates or sustains a personal relationship and involves personal commitment. There is a personal interest and involvement in the outcome of the prophecy that draws us in.

   iii When considering prophecy we should ask not only "What was said at the time?" but also, "What was the promise for?" The answer may look very different to a literal fulfilment of the prophecy, because promise is much bigger than prediction.

   iv We must not limit Old Testament prophecies to mere prediction, but if we embrace them as promise, within the confines of their theological intent, they become something so much bigger.

4. New Testament fulfilment

a. What of those familiar prophetic passages that we read at this time every year – what can we learn from how they were fulfilled? Some of them are quite specific and only address one aspect of the coming of Jesus in terms of their fulfilment.

Isaiah 7:14 *Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel.*

Luke 1:30-33 *And the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favour with God. **31** And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus. **32** He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. And the Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David, **33** and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.*

b. Here is the literal fulfilment of Isaiah's prophecy, but it expands on the bare bones that Isaiah prophesied. The angel connects several other prophecies to this one, showing that there is continuity and harmony in the Old Testament prophetic record.

Micah 5:2 *But you, O Bethlehem Ephrathah, who are too little to be among the clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to be ruler in Israel, whose coming forth is from of old, from ancient days.*

Luke 2:4-6 *Joseph also went up from Galilee, from the town of Nazareth, to Judea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and lineage of David, **5** to be registered with Mary, his betrothed who was with child. **6** And while they were there, the time came for her to give birth. **7** And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in swaddling cloths and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the guest room.*

c. This fulfilment shows us how God is the architect of history arranging circumstances in order to achieve his purposes. When Micah gave this prophetic word 700 years before, there was no Roman Empire, and no framework for a registration system such as this. God had a plan right from the outset and he was continually working in history to bring his plan to fruition.

Numbers 24:17 *I see him, but not now; I behold him, but not near: a star shall come out of Jacob, and a sceptre shall rise out of Israel; it shall crush the forehead of Moab and break down all the sons of Sheth.*

Matthew 2:1-2 *Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem, ² saying, "Where is he who has been born king of the Jews? For we saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him."*

d. The Magi were descendants of Jews who had been exiled in the Babylonian captivity, choosing to stay in Babylon rather than return to Jerusalem. God gave them a special sign, a miraculous star that announced the birth of a King.

   i This was not a natural phenomenon, but a supernatural one. Jesus' birth was surrounded by the supernatural – angelic visitations, warning dreams and guiding stars. The star was a manifestation of the glory of God he used to reveal and guide these men to the saviour.

   ii This supernatural occurrence, alongside the prophecies of the Old Testament led these men to travel the 550 miles from Babylon to Bethlehem. Fulfilment of prophecy is not limited to natural means, many fulfilments of end-times prophecy will be supernatural.

Isaiah 9:6-7 *For to us a child is born, to us a son is given; and the government shall be upon his shoulder, and his name shall be called Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. ⁷ Of the increase of his government and of peace there will be no end, on the throne of David and over his kingdom, to establish it and to uphold it with justice and with righteousness from this time forth and forevermore. The zeal of the LORD of hosts will do this.*

   iii This fulfilment it is speaking about two entirely different time-frames: Jesus' first coming as the Son of God, and his second coming as the conquering King.

   iv The child who is born and the son who is given was fulfilled in the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem. Then the focus shifts to his second coming, so this part of the prophecy is yet to be fully realised. When Jesus returns he will come not as a suffering servant but as a conquering King to establish his everlasting government here on the earth.

   v The titles Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace are his to own right now, and he is all of those things. The fulfilment of these is demonstrated in his life and ministry, and they will continue into the millennial kingdom and beyond.

   vi The final elements of promise are again future and will be fulfilled when Jesus returns at the end of the age. Then he will take up his reign as King of kings, and his government and peace will be fully established on earth as it is in heaven, increasing year on year.

   vii He will establish his kingdom rule from David's throne in Jerusalem with justice and righteousness as its foundation. We don't yet know the full extent of what these things will look like, because we are not there yet. The fulfilments of many prophecies in the New Testament have far exceeded the bare requirements of a literal – they are prophecies of promise carrying the heart of God and his plan of redemption to a broken and fallen world. We cannot begin to imagine the glory of what the fulfilment of these promises will bring.

e. As we approach this Christmas season, let's do so with an air of expectation and wonder. Let's press in and lay hold of his promises. He's given us a glimpse of glory through these prophets of old, and he's beckoning us on until the day we'll be able to enter fully into the reality of the shadows we now behold.

Malachi 1:11 *For from the rising of the sun to its setting my name will be great among the nations, and in every place incense will be offered to my name, and a pure offering. For my name will be great among the nations, says the LORD of hosts.*