

## *Nature of Prophecy*

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Welcome to a course on messianic prophecy. We trust that our studies together will be profitable as we plumb a subject that is most interesting and which is most important in the study of the Word of God.

We might from your syllabus note the purposes of such a course. It is to first of all trace the development of messianic prophecy from its origin in the Old Testament to the period of the first century AD showing something of the defined plan of God concerning His purposes within world history and ultimate destiny of man.

Second, we want to show how Jesus of Nazareth in His being, His life, and His work fulfilled many messianic prophecies and that He will yet fulfill many of the other prophecies of the Old Testament in the coming prophetic kingdom. This means, of course, that we are already indicating a hermeneutic prophecy that includes the lesson concerning a coming prophetic kingdom, but we'll be getting into this a little bit later on.

The third purpose is to indicate, also, Jewish interpretation of messianic prophecy in the various Scripture passages that will be exegeted in the course. It is important to see in a number of places how Jewish people have exegeted the Scriptures, and many times they will throw light on a proper analysis and exegesis of a passage of Scripture.

Fourth, we want to develop some discriminating judgment in exegesis as to what constitutes a legitimate messianic prophecy and/or typology in the interrelationship between the Old Testament and the New Testament.

A fifth purpose is to examine some of the national prophecies and typological teaching concerning Israel directly relevant to the ministry of Jesus the Messiah.

And last of all and not least we want to provide from this study in messianic prophecy the opportunity for enrichment and blessing in the personal life of the student.

Now I'm going to indicate just a few volumes that will be helpful at this point for the study of messianic prophecy, but certainly we shall be referring to other volumes, other bibliography, later on in the course itself. I might, for example, indicate the series of David L. Cooper. This man lived in another generation in the twenties and in the thirties, but yet in his books which analyzed Jesus the Messiah and from an Old Testament point of view, the eternal God revealing Himself; another book, *Messiah, His First Coming Scheduled* [Los Angeles: Biblical Research Society, 1939]; still another, *Messiah, His Nature and His Person* Los Angeles: Biblical Research Society, 1933]; and so on. We'll be referring to these books in succeeding lessons. Franz Delitzsch of another generation also has a book on messianic prophecies and lectures on it [*Messianic Prophecies: Lectures* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1880)]. A source from a Jewish point of view is Julius H. Greenstone, *The Messiah Idea in Jewish History* [Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1906]. Still another very important is from a Jewish point of view, Professor [Joseph] Klausner, *The Messianic Idea in Israel* [New York: Macmillan, 1955]. A Hebrew Christian has provided us with a very good study, A. J. Kligerman, *Messianic Prophecies in the Old Testament* [Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1957].

In the study of many passages in the Old Testament we will have to understand the historical background of the Scripture. This is very important. We are going to interpret, and I would at this point just recommend two very good books on the history of Israel, John Bright, *A History of Israel* [1959; 4th ed., Louisville, KY; Westminster John Knox, 2000], and R. K. Harrison, *A History of Old Testament Times* [Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1957]. Milton Terry is also important for his biblical hermeneutics [*Biblical Hermeneutics* (reprint ed.; Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 1999)], and another book in the area of hermeneutics is Bernard Ramm, *Protestant Biblical Interpretation* [1950; reprint ed., Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1970]. But enough of this for now. We will be referring to other bibliographies a little bit later on.

In Block A of your syllabus we want to just make a few introductory remarks concerning this area of messianic prophecy. We have provided a definition of prophecy: that it is a declaration of future events such as no human wisdom or forecast is sufficient to make. I think we have to recognize here that we're not talking

about someone who is able to, as a statesman, foresee significant events in history over the next five or ten years from the time of his utterance of these statesmanlike words. This is something which deals with future events, and no human wisdom is able to handle or even to begin to handle the information that pertains to events in the future which can run anywhere from seven hundred to a thousand and even two thousand years from the time the prophecy is made. Prophecy also depends on a knowledge of the many relationships of human affairs, which belong only to the all-knowing God. Here again, of course, prophecy is interrelated with human history. I am not saying here at this point that prophecy is history foretold. There are obviously too many ramifications to make a statement like this. However, prophecy does relate and speak to certain events within history, and we know that in the many interrelationships between human affairs that prophecy must have this in the knowledge of its proclamation, and only an all-knowing God who knows events a thousand years, two thousand years removed from the utterance of the prophecy, only an all-knowing God is able to provide a word of prophecy that will take into account all the many relationships of human affairs. And we say, finally, in the definition of prophecy that from its very nature, prophecy must be a divine revelation.

I think we have to recognize here that the omnipotence of God can certainly select certain individuals and give, out of the omniscience of God, certain information. And as it is viewed once a prophecy is fulfilled, we must say that by its very nature, this was divine revelation.

Now, second, in this matter of the meaning and nature of prophecy we have to mention some of the critical approaches taken by a number of scholars. We've already touched on one of these where a critic might say that prophecy is nothing more than an educated guess. A man who is a statesman who has keen insight as to history, as to human affairs, as to the relationship between nations, might be able to predict five years, ten years, from the time of his prediction concerning certain events that might take place.

While we don't rule out the fact that there are statesmen who are able to do this, we must emphasize that prophecy is not simply an educated guess. Once we get into the study of prophecy, for example, the prophecies that relate to the coming of the messiah from the Old Testament point of view, the mathematical odds concerning prophecy being an educated guess are overwhelmingly against it, and we'll see in succeeding lessons as to why.

Another critical approach to prophecy is to rule out the idea of divine revelation. That is, these men say that it is not possible for a man to receive divine revelation concerning events that would happen hundreds of years hence. And, usual procedure in this case is to rearrange the biblical sections. I suppose that *The Introduction to the Old Testament* [rev. ed.; New York: Harper & Row, 1948] by Robert Pfeiffer is a good example where, as he echoes the old Wellhausen theory that prophecy cannot exist, he rearranges what is called prophecy and slots them into history. In other words, Daniel does not prophesy events four hundred, five hundred, six hundred years removed from his time. Rather, Robert Pfeiffer says that Daniel wrote all of this in the second century, and he was simply writing history.

Still another approach to prophecy, for example with regard to the Messiah or Jesus, is to explain that one man willed to fulfill the word. Now, in a positive sense, in a wholesome sense, we do see Jesus fulfilling the Word and consciously doing this. Even to the very end when, as He hung on the cross, He said, "I thirst," and He took the vinegar and, thus fulfilled Scripture down to the very end. But we're not talking about this kind of an approach. We're talking about an approach that was used in *The Passover Plot* by [Hugh J.] Schonfield, and here he says that Jesus set out and willed to fulfill the prophecies [1965; New York: The Disinformation Company, 2005]. In the process of doing this Schonfield takes the liberty of accepting what is history and not accepting portions of Scripture to suit his own subjective notions as to what is historically valid. In a case like this, especially in *The Passover Plot*, [the planning] of Jesus does not come to fruition, and Jesus dies in the attempt. If this is the case, if prophecy is to be seen in this light, then certainly one could question the honesty of all the writers, the honesty of what men were trying to say, and this would not commend itself to people reading the Bible.

And last, there are some critics who indicate that the prophets of Israel were like the prophets of other nations of the Middle East who lived at the same time or who were there at the same time when Israel was getting its start. In other words, there are some prophets who say that the Old Testament prophets were just like the ecstasies of other nations.

It's true that the Old Testament text itself shows that the arts of soothsaying and divination were extensively practiced in Canaan. A quick perusal of Daniel 2:9–14 will indicate this. This kind of phenomenon wasn't limited to the land of Israel. It was to be

found in all the nations, including Egypt, Babylon, and throughout the Near East. I think that we have to recognize that prophetic phenomena in the form of certain aspects of external behavior and religious psychology were to be found in other cultures outside Israel throughout various periods of history. In general, characteristics of all religions with respect to certain beliefs and practices show some superficial similarities; however, it is the divine source of Israel's prophecy and the unique characteristics of its prophetic institutions that confirm the fact that mere external similarities do not prove relationship. It was [Johannes] Lindblom in his *Prophecy in Ancient Israel* [Philadelphia: Fortress, 1962] who declares that the ecstasy of prophecy or ecstasy as prophecy or vice versa in itself is commonly borrowed by one people from another, but this certainly was not true in Israel. Israel had a unique aspect in its prophetic institutions. So much for those who were the critics.

Another aspect of this meaning and nature of prophecy has to do with the uniqueness of Israel, and we see one uniqueness, just very quickly at this point, and this was in the Abrahamic covenant. In Genesis 12:2–3, in Genesis 15, and in Genesis 17:1–11 we have the Abrahamic covenant, a covenant given by God to Israel. And as you see this covenant begins to be particularized until finally when you come to the sons of Israel, the covenant has special connotation that this sets the seed of Israel apart from all other nations and accounts for the existence of the Jewish people today. Of no other nation can this be said. We're going to come back to this a little bit later on as we study these passages of Scripture, but certainly if we're going to talk about the meaning and the nature of prophecy, we have to see the people who are in the center of history because of an agreement or a covenant that God has with the sons of Abraham and particularized with the sons of Israel. We also ought to recognize the place of prophecy in the Scriptures, the prophetic institution that God gave to Israel. The classic is in Deuteronomy 18:15–22. Long before prophets ever arose in any great numbers in Israel, God promised that He would always have men who would speak for Him, and it's significant that before Moses ever passed off the scene, we find that God gave a word to the nation in a very specific way. For example, in Deuteronomy 18:15 [New International Version] Moses declares, "The LORD your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among you." We shouldn't immediately apply this to Christ, as Peter did when you come to the book of Acts. I think we have to see it within the setting of Israel itself. Here Moses was about to pass off the scene. Who would be the prophetic voice for God? Who would stand in the place to speak for God to the people? And now comes this promise that the Lord

will raise up a prophet who would speak for God even as Moses did. So we see here a promise of a prophetic ministry. But this passage also gives us the test of who is to be a true and who would be a false prophet. For example: in verses 21 and 22 [New American Standard Bible] of this chapter we read, “You may say in your heart, ‘How will we know the word which the LORD has not spoken?’” Here was a question in answer to a situation where somebody who would say, “I’m speaking the words of God” and wasn’t, and so logically the question comes, and so here’s the answer in verse 22: “When a prophet speaks in the name of the LORD, if the thing does not come about or come true, that is the thing which the LORD has not spoken. The prophet has spoken it presumptuously; you shall not be afraid of him.”

It’s interesting to note that one of the key tests of the prophet was the short-range prophecy; that is, those prophecies which could be tested in the lifetime of those who would be listening to the prophets. The test here was that of 100 percent accuracy. In other words, someone who was going to be a prophet speaking on behalf of God had to be 100 percent accurate and not one whit less. If he failed in any one prophecy, then there would be a question in the ears and in the hearts of the people. We’ll come back to this in a succeeding lesson, but we’ve said enough here at this point for an introduction as to the meaning and the nature of prophecy.

Now we go on to our next block of material in your syllabus, Block B, which has to do with the hermeneutics of typology. We have two blocks of material before we ever get to a study of the various passages of Scripture. We ought to say something about hermeneutics and hermeneutics of typology and a hermeneutics of prophecy. In case you are wondering as to what hermeneutics means, we’ll define hermeneutics as the science and the art of Bible interpretation. It’s a science because there are certain rules laid down as to how to interpret and how to exegete a passage of Scripture; rules which relate to the very grammatical construction, the linguistic expressions, and all of these. So it is a science, but at the same time, it’s also an art because there is a sense of a skill that must be cultivated in handling a passage of Scripture because so many factors are involved in the interpretation of it.

When we get into this matter of typology—and we’ll just have enough time to get into it in this lesson—we note that there is a justification of typology. Some critics have contended that there is no such thing as typology; that this is nothing more than some sort of a forced exegesis. It’s true that there are some who force

this matter of typology, but this does not mean that typology does not exist at all. We have to recognize that there is a very general relationship between the Old and the New Testaments that does accept typology as an emblem of a figure of speech. There is a strong prophetic element established in a real and final tie between the Old and the New Testaments. Some have said many times that the New Testament is latent in the Old and that the Old is evident in the New. And when we come to this matter of typology, we have to recognize that there is something unique. We'll have just enough time to give you a definition of the type, and we'll get into this into the next lesson.

Milton Terry gives us a definition of the type. "The type is that species of emblem by which one object is made to represent another mystically." So it is, therefore, employed only in religious matters, particularly in relation to the coming, the office, and the death of our Savior. In this manner, for example, the offering of Isaac is considered as a type of our Savior's offering Himself as an atonement or as an atoning sacrifice. So types have a very definite and a unique place, and we have to see the divine tie between Old and New Testaments. In typical prediction, or prediction that includes the typology, we do note that things or events or persons are in a divine designation. They have a divine imprint upon them. There is involved in the type a forecast of things to come, and there is that tie between in the Old Testament and the New Testament situation. Perhaps some specific New Testament statements would indicate this matter of the type. In Hebrews 7 we talk about Melchizedek, and we relate Melchizedek to Christ. In Hebrews 10 we talk about the perfect sacrifice, and we relate the sacrificial system of the Old Testament to the perfect sacrifice of the Messiah.

We trust that we have properly launched you in a very fascinating study of messianic prophecy, and we shall be continuing with our study of the hermeneutics of typology in our next lesson.