

How To Study The Bible (#20)

Understanding Prophecy

This material taken from my personal notes of the text *How To Read The Bible For All Its Worth* by Gordon Fee and Douglas Stuart, Third Edition)

Chapter Ten - The Prophets: Enforcing The Covenant In Israel

Introduction

1. There are more books of the Bible that come under the heading of prophecy than any other.
2. These books were written between 760 and 460 BC.
3. The minor prophets were only minor in size/length. They were originally grouped together in one large book known as “the book of the twelve,” or simply “the twelve.”

The Nature of Prophecy

1. Prophetic books are often the most difficult to interpret and understand.
2. This is usually due to misunderstandings in their function and form.

The Meaning of Prophecy

1. The primary difficulty for most students is due to an inadequate and inaccurate understanding of the word “prophecy.”
2. It is usually defined as foretelling or prediction, something that we often look at first in understanding them.
3. Consider these stats: less than 2% of Old Testament prophecies are Messianic, less than 5% anticipate the new covenant age, and less than 1% are predictive.
4. While the prophets did predict the future, it was more often than not the immediate future of Israel, Judah and surrounding nations.

The Prophets As Spokespersons

1. The primary function of prophets was simply to speak for God to their own contemporaries.
2. The emphasis is on speaking. Of hundreds of prophets in Israel, only sixteen had messages collected and written in book form.

3. In some cases, such as Elijah and Elisha, we know more of what they did than what they said. What they said was plainly presented in the context of their times. Some of the material about prophets is a combination of their prophecy and their biography, as is the case with Nathan, Huldah, Jonah, and Daniel.
4. Generally, in Old Testament narrative, what we hear is *about* the prophets and very little *from* prophets (cf. Jonah - jla).
5. The length of the longer books of prophecy is due to the fact that they are mostly collections of spoken oracles, not always in chronological sequence and delivered/recorded poetically.

The Problem of History

1. The problem of historical distance complicates our understanding of prophecy.
2. The original audience had distinct advantages over those who read the prophets’ message/s secondhand, and much later, in a totally different language and culture.
3. Because we are removed from the religious, historical, and cultural life of ancient Israel, we have trouble putting prophetic words in proper context.

The Function of Prophecy in Israel

Four things need to be understood in order for us to have a clearer understanding of the role and function of Old Testament prophets.

1. The prophets were covenant enforcement mediators.
 - a. The prior chapter (the chapter on OT “law” in SF’s book) - examined the relationship between God and his people by means of understanding covenant relationships.
 - b. God not only gave Israel his law, he enforced it through the role of the prophets.
 - c. Through the prophets God reminded later generations after Moses, that if the law was followed, they would be blessed; if it were not followed, they would be punished.
 - d. The prophets did not invent the blessings or curses they announced... they originated with God.

- e. The law contained certain categories of corporate blessings for covenant faithfulness: life, health, prosperity, agricultural abundance, respect and safety.
 - f. The law also contained categories of corporate punishments: death, disease, drought, dearth, danger, distraction, deceit, deportation, destitution and disgrace.
 - g. What God communicated to the prophets reflects the same categories.
 - h. Depending on the time, much of what the prophets addressed focused on curses. Statistically, most of what they announced in the 8th, 7th, and early 6th centuries BC were curses because Israel was about to suffer destruction circa 722 BC. The same thing applied to the impending end of the southern kingdom circa 587 BC. It only makes sense: because both nations were heading for punishment during these periods of time, the message of the prophets is more curse/s than blessing. The purpose of curse-centered messages was to induce repentance.(cf. Amos 4 - jla)
 - i. The message of the prophets changed, however, after the period of captivity. Punishment now complete, God resumed his basic message to the prophets, one of mercy, and its attendant blessings.
 - j. Look for this simple pattern as you read the prophetic books:
 - i. Identification of Israel's sin or of God's love for his people,
 - ii. Prediction of curse or blessing, depending on the circumstance.
 - k. This is what the message of the prophets usually conveys.
2. The prophets' message was not their own, but God's.
- a. Each of the prophets had his own unique style, vocabulary, emphases, idioms and concerns.
 - b. In spite of that, we must realize that it is God who called them to prophesy, a truth embedded in the very nature of the word prophet, and the Semitic verb "to call."
 - c. It is for this reason that we see so much emphasis on reminders like: thus saith the Lord, so says the Lord, declares the Lord, this is what the Lord says, this is what the Lord said to me, give them a message, etc.
3. The prophets were God's direct representatives.
- a. The prophets were like ambassadors sent from heaven to relay the sovereign's will to his people.
 - b. They themselves were not radical social reformers or innovative religious thinkers.
 - c. The reforms and thoughts that *God wished to impart* was the basis of their message.
 - d. The message of the prophets is not merely God's word as the prophet saw it, but God's word as God wished the prophet to present it.
4. The message of the prophets is not original.
- a. Through inspiration the prophets revealed the essential content of the original Mosaic covenant's warnings and promises.
 - b. Though the wording might be new, the concepts were as old as the law (cf. "old paths"). Their message simply restates what we find in the books of Exodus to Deuteronomy.
 - c. Their job involved rephrasing and or restructuring the message so that it might appear to have a certain kind of newness, but it was always God's message as found in the law. (cf. Hos 4:2 which summarized five of the ten commandments in one word per commandment; cf. Jesus' use of the same in Mk 10:19; Mt 18:18-19; Lk 18:20.)
 - d. Even Messianic prophecies, like those found in Isaiah, were not new.
 - e. They might reveal new details about the life of the Messiah, but the original message was still rooted in the law (cf. Deut 18:15ff; Jn 1:45).
- The Exegetical Task*
1. The Need For Outside Help
- a. The first chapter of this book (SF - HTRTBFAIW) addressed this simple notion: God wrote his book for us to understand so we must be able to understand it without any outside help.

- b. This notion lacks proper perspective: some parts are obvious on the surface, but others are not. Some are profound, some are simple.
- c. The prophetic books require time and study, not just casual reading.
- d. We must become familiar with their historical, cultural, and political settings that are so different from our own.
- e. To become familiar with their backgrounds, the authors recommend:
 - i. Bible dictionaries - they provide articles on the historical setting of each book, basic outlines, special features, and issues of interpretation that readers must understand. They help us become acquainted with how God's message came to the prophets to God's people in particular situations.
 - ii. Commentaries - they provide lengthy introductions to each book, they provide explanations of the meaning of individual verses.
 - iii. Bible handbooks - these works often combine the best features of both Bible dictionaries and commentaries.

2. The Historical Context

- a. To understand the historical context of the prophets, we must understand their times.
- b. This includes understanding the broad historical context of their work as a whole.
- c. It also demands understanding the specific context, for example, that of a single oracle.

3. The Larger Context

- a. The prophetic books come from a rather narrow band of Israel's history (760–460 BC).
- b. We have no prophetic utterances from Abraham's day or David's day though prophets and prophecies occurred during each.
- c. Why are the writings of the prophets concentrated during the three centuries between Amos and Malachi?
- d. The answer: this is the period in Israel's history that called specifically for covenant enforcement mediation, the major task of the prophets.
- e. These years are characterized by the following three things:
 - i. Unprecedented political, military, economic and social upheaval

- ii. A high-level of religious infidelity and disregard for the law of Moses
- iii. Shifts in populations and national boundaries, including shifts in the balance of power on the international scene
- f. The division of the kingdom into two parts, North and South, and the differences in their general religious strength, demanded that the messages of the prophets address those differences. The prophets spoke largely to the events surrounding each kingdom's fall.

4. The Specific Context

- a. Each prophecy was delivered in a specific historical setting.
- b. Knowing the date, audience, and situation, when knowable, helps us understand each prophecy.
- c. Note the example cited in Hosea 5:8–10. The date, 734 BC; the audience, northern Israel; the cities, Jerusalem and Bethel; the situation, war; the coalition, between Israel and Syria; the invasion of Judah; the involvement of Assyria; etc. All come to play in understanding this passage.

5. The Isolation of Individual Oracles

- a. In understanding the epistles, the authors (Stuart and Fee) stressed "think paragraphs."
- b. Concerning prophets, the authors stress "think oracles."
- c. Remember, that the eclectic nature of prophecy is revealed in their run-on fashion of reporting God's message.
- d. The messages, spoken and recorded at different times and places over the many years of their ministry, were eventually collected and written down, sometimes without regard to divisions to indicate where one message ends and another one begins.
- e. There are exceptions: the early chapters of Zechariah and Haggai date their prophecies.

- f. Note, for example, Amos 5: keep in mind that explanatory titles are not inspired, that changes of subject, issues of social injustice, prediction of miseries, the use of the term “day of the Lord,” criticism of hypercritical worship, and an overview of Israel’s past sinful history, that eventually leads to exile, which is predicted, all comes into play in understanding this passage.
 - g. We must always ask whether or not any given passage/chapter is a single oracle, or component parts of many oracles.
6. The Forms of Prophetic Utterance
- a. The Lawsuit - God often takes Israel to court (figuratively) to show that they are guilty of sin, have violated his covenant and are, therefore, to be punished.
 - b. The Woe - warning of impending punishment, death, etc.; some distress (woe) exists; it exists for this reason (usually their sin); followed by a prediction of doom
 - c. The Promise - also known as a salvation oracle; usually includes a reference to the future, mention of a radical change (Israel’s repentance and subsequent restoration) and a mention of blessing
 - d. The Enactment Prophecy - the prophets often acted out their messages; Isaiah walked “naked” for three years (to show that Israel would be stripped and lead away captive); Ezekiel’s model city; Zechariah’s two shepherds
 - e. The Messenger Speech - most common form of prophecy; prophets remind Israel they are God’s spokesman and that they are there to call them back to God’s law
 - f. The Prophets As Poets - in part for effect and ease of memorization (cf. Longman’s “How To Read The Psalms”)
 - i. Synonymous parallelism - the second line reinforces the first (Is 44:22)
 - ii. Antithetical parallelism - the second line contrasts the first (Hos 7:14)
 - iii. Synthetic parallelism - the second line adds new information to the first (Obadiah 21)

Some Hermeneutical Suggestions

Exegesis requires that we set the prophets in their respective contexts so we can hear and understand what God says to Israel. The authors have three areas of concern in this regard:

1. A Caution: The Prophet As Foreteller Of The Future
 - a. More often than not the future they told was immediate and applied directly to Israel. (cf. Ezek 25-39)
 - b. Note the specific warnings about Is 49:23. Some interpreters ignore context, intent, wording re this passage.
 - c. We must be careful not to make prophecies say what we want them to say. Always seek God’s intent. [contemporary audience; original writer/speaker; original audience of readers/listeners; God - cf. the earlier articles in this series- jla]
 - d. We must always understand that temporal meanings are to be understood in light of an eternal plan.
 - e. Note, especially, the prophetic perspective of chronological events: straight on view vs. side view; our perspective does not always show the proper “distance” between them. [cf., photographic perspective - jla]
 - f. Remember - eschatological language is often metaphorical.
2. A Concern: Prophecy And Second Meanings
 - a. Initial fulfillment - to original, intended audience
 - b. Sensus plenior - fuller meaning, to secondary audience (cf. Mt 2:15 and Hos 11:1 re “out of Egypt;” Ex 17:1ff; Num 20:1ff; 1 Cor 10:4 re Christ the rock, baptism, etc.; remember it is a function of inspiration; we only know of sensus plenior after the fact from God’s word, not our imagination.)
3. A Final Benefit: The Dual Emphasis On Orthodoxy And Orthopraxy - We must have both correct belief and correct practice.