

Interpretation of Prophecy

Old Testament prophecies do not always distinguish clearly between what we refer to today as the 1st and 2d [sic] advents of Christ, but often deal with these two great events as one, or as one rapidly following the other. Most of the prophetic messages are set forth in literal language, but some are highly figurative or symbolic (Dan 2; 7; 8; Zec. 1-6; Rev 6-19; etc.). **The element of prediction in prophecy was designed to afford a view of the things of time in the light of eternity, to alert the church for effective action at appropriate times, to facilitate personal preparation for the final crisis, to vindicate God and to leave man without excuse in the day of judgment, and to attest the validity of prophecy as a whole.** The many examples of fulfilled prophecies—whether their accomplishment came immediately or in later ages, or whether they were recorded in the Bible or seen in history—serve to establish faith in the inspired Word. God calls attention to His unique power to declare “the end from the beginning” (Is 46:9,10), and Jesus says, “I have told you before it come to pass, that, when it is come to pass, ye might believe” (Jn 14:29).

At times, because of highly figurative or symbolic language, or because of the difficulty of relating the messages to their historical context, or of the operation of the conditional factor (see Jer 18:7-10) in the forecast of events yet future, or the historical transition from literal Israel to the Christian church, the prophetic books lend themselves more easily to misinterpretation than the historical, poetic, and doctrinal sections of Scripture. Accordingly, the only safe procedure in the interpretation and application of the prophetic messages is a systematic study of, and thorough familiarity with, prophecy as a whole. Only on the basis of such a study is it possible to arrive at sound principles of interpretation. **It is first necessary to ascertain precisely what the prophets wrote, under the Spirit’s guidance, and what they meant by what they wrote. An exact study of the words and grammatical relationships of a passage is also necessary. At times uncertainty as to the meaning of a passage can be resolved only by reference to the language in which it was originally written. Every sentence must be understood in relation to its larger context. Under no circumstances is it safe to consider a passage without reference to its literary and historical context. Every prophetic message had a meaning for the people to whom it was delivered. One of the first and most important tasks of the interpreter is to ascertain what that meaning was. Only then is it possible to arrive at a valid application of the prophecies to our day. The Bible must be made its own interpreter, that is, Bible passages must be compared with other Bible passages dealing with the same topic.**

Generally speaking, the promises and predictions sent through the OT prophets to literal Israel were to have been fulfilled to them on condition of obedience and loyalty. However, they rejected God’s plan for them as a nation, and what God purposed to accomplish through Israel of old He will finally accomplish through His spiritual children. (Accordingly, many of God’s promises originally made to ancient Israel will be fulfilled in principle to the Christian church.) God’s plans and purposes will ultimately prevail (see Is 46:10), though the means and

agencies through which this goal is to be achieved may change to meet changed conditions. When an individual or a nation refuses to cooperate with God's expressed purpose, that individual or nation forfeits his role in the divine plan (see Jer 18:6-10; compare Dan 5:25-28). When, at the crucifixion, the Jews rejected Christ, God took the kingdom away from them and gave it "to a nation bringing forth the fruits" of the kingdom (Mt 21:41-44; 23:36-38). As the "nation" of which Christ thus spoke, the Christian church replaced Israel in God's plan (see 1 Pe 2:9, 10). The writings of the OT prophets are fraught with meaning for Christian believers (see Lk 24:25-27,44; Rom 15:4; 2 Timothy 3:16,17; compare 1 Cor 10:1-12), but in view of the fact that the Christian church is neither a racial nor a political entity residing in the literal land of Canaan and surrounded by literal enemies such as Assyria, Babylon, and Egypt, many details of the prophecies of the OT are not applicable/literally to Christian times. Furthermore, many of the prophecies dealt exclusively with specific historical situations in the long ago. **From a reading of the OT prophets the Christian may derive 2 benefits: (1) he may profit from the instruction God gave His people in the long ago by applying its principles to himself and by noting the results of accepting or rejecting that instruction; (2) he can ascertain what predictions, unfulfilled to literal Israel, remain to be fulfilled to God's people today.** However, great care must be taken lest unjustified applications be made. He must determine the extent to which a given prophecy is conditional in nature, the extent to which the conditions were fulfilled, and finally whether Inspiration has indicated a later fulfillment. In particular, study must be given to how the transition from literal Israel to the Christian church may affect the fulfillment of the prediction. **Only when a later inspired writer reapplies a prophecy to Christian times can a positive reapplication be made.** *Seventh-day Adventist Bible Dictionary*, pp. 906,907