

## Lesson 6

### Foretelling the Future

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Section 9 Assignment

At the end of this lesson, you should be able to:

1. Understand how the prophets developed prophecies about the future from their teaching regarding the contemporary scene.
2. Distinguish between the different strands of prophecy.
3. Be familiar with the concept of the 'Day of the Lord' and its various uses.
4. Show an understanding of the term 'remnant' and how the prophets foresaw the return to the land.
5. Understand what the prophets foresaw as the 'messianic age', and the conversion of Gentiles.
6. Have some understanding of Hebraic Eschatological concepts in the time of the prophets.

## Introduction

This lesson covers a great deal of material. The textbook gives good coverage to the subject and needs to be carefully studied. The notes for this lesson will not be so long as earlier lessons in order to allow you time to study the textbook. Be sure to look up all the biblical references and note their context.

## Contemporary Prophecy

We have already dealt with Contemporary Prophecy at some length and given numerous examples. It is essential to bear in mind that contemporary prophecy was always the starting point for the prophets. They were men and women of their times with both a love for their nation and a burden for the word of God. These were the two basic drives within the prophets which resulted in their giving careful attention to what was happening around them and seeking to direct the word of God into the life of the nation.

Their objective always was for the good of the nation, to warn of impending disaster, to call the nation back into the ways of righteousness and thus save the nation from the inevitable consequences of their sinful ways.

Remember that the method of the prophet was always to study the contemporary situation, nationally or internationally; then to gather the facts and take them into the presence of the Lord through intercession. It was through these times of prayer that the prophet was sensitive to the response of God to the factual situation in the nation. Such an understanding of the word of God relevant to the contemporary situation naturally led to an understanding of the future.

### Question 1

Summarise the motives of the prophets in their handling of contemporary prophecy.

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## The Near Future

A major part of the prophets ministry was to deal with the near future. In fact it would probably be true to say that their major preoccupation was with the immediate outcome of contemporary events. It was because they foresaw where the trends in the nation were heading that their message took on a note of urgency. Read Jeremiah Chapter 5.

In this chapter there is a vivid description of the moral and spiritual state of the nation. The prophet notices that the ordinary people are dishonest and rebellious because 'they do not know the way of the Lord'. So he goes to the leaders and he finds exactly the same situation. This leads him to prophesy what will happen in the near future if the nation continues along the present path. He says God will bring a distant nation against them (v 15) and use them as the instrument of his judgment. He foresees the time coming when the people will ask 'Why has the Lord our God done all this to us?' (v 19) and he is instructed to respond 'As you have forsaken me and served foreign gods in your own land, so now you will serve foreigners in a land not your own.'

On another occasion Jeremiah foresaw the disastrous international situation which would arise if Zedekiah carried out his plan to lead a coalition of local nations against Babylon. In Jeremiah 27 there is the record of envoys coming from Edom, Moab, Ammon, Tyre and Sidon to Jerusalem to form the conspiracy. The prophet sent them an unequivocal message that God would punish those who revolted against Nebuchadnezzar (v 8). This is a vivid example of the prophet's role in international as well as national affairs and his responsibility to warn of what would happen in the near future if present policies were pursued.

**Question 2**

Find an example in the writing prophets (not quoted in the notes) of a ‘near future’ prophecy.

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**The Far Distant Future**

From our present day stand point this is by far the most spectacular part of the prophetic ministry. We have the advantage of looking back over the past 2500 years since the time of the exile and we can see how the long distance perception of the prophet has been fulfilled. We can also examine those prophecies which yet remain unfulfilled.

Nevertheless, in order to understand the purpose of prophecy given to one generation that would not be fulfilled in their own lifetime we have to see the context in which those prophecies were given. We have already noticed that the prophet’s task was always to begin with the contemporary situation, and the trends in the nation and their immediate outcome in the near future. It cannot be over emphasised that this was the primary task of the prophets.

We have also noticed that when the prophets got into the presence of the Lord to bring before him the contemporary situation they did so in the context of God’s known activity throughout history. This in turn gave them their understanding of the very nature and purposes of God. It was against this background that they were able to perceive the ultimate purposes of God.

The prophets needed this revelation of God’s ultimate purposes for the world and for his covenant people in order to be able to understand the way he was working out his purposes in their own lifetime. Their references to events many generations in the future were in order to broaden the vision of the people; to enable them to understand the historical perspective so that they could understand the requirements of the Lord. Jeremiah’s constant complaint was that the people did not know ‘the way of the Lord, the requirements of their God’ (Jeremiah 5: 4). The prophets saw their task as teaching both leaders and people about the requirements of the Lord, the terms of the covenant, and drawing them back into a right relationship with God so that he could work out his good purposes through the nation, the people he had chosen to be his servants in the world.

**Question 3**

Find an example in the writing prophets (not given in the notes) of a prophecy relating to the far-distant-future.

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In the textbook we have outlined five major elements in the teaching of the prophets in regards to the future. They are :

- 1 The Day of the Lord
- 2 The Ingathering of the Exiles
- 3 The Messianic Age
- 4 The Conversion of the Gentiles
- 5 Eschatological and Apocalyptic Concepts.

Read the text carefully for each of these headings. With each one read the following additional notes.

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**The Day of the Lord**

Use a Concordance and look up some of the references to the ‘Day of the Lord’ in the prophets from Isaiah to Malachi. The prophets often speak of ‘that day’ or ‘the day’.

The ‘Day of the Lord’ was to be a time when God would set right the injustices in the world. It would be a time when he would intervene in the history of the nations and establish his reign of righteousness, truth and integrity. It was envisaged as a day when the righteous would rejoice, but the wicked would mourn. ‘When your judgments come upon the earth, the people of the world learn righteousness’ (Isaiah 26: 9).

Amos warned that the day of the Lord would not simply be one in which the enemies of Israel would be punished, which was the popular view. Amos emphasised the righteousness of God which meant that if Israel continued in her wickedness and rebellion she would suffer in the day of the Lord. That day would be a day of darkness and not of light. Read Amos 5: 18 - 27. This changed the whole concept of the day of the Lord in popular parlance. If you carry on reading into chapter 6, 1-7 you get a picture of the complacency and affluence in the nation with the people oblivious of the danger of God’s judgment falling upon them. Amos says that they are no better than the pagan nations around them so the day of the Lord for them will be a day of terror and not of rejoicing.

Thus with the eighth century prophets the day of the Lord took on an ethical concept which would apply to all nations including Israel despite their covenant relationship with the Lord.

**Question 4**

Give two *contrasting* examples of the use of the term ‘Day of the Lord’.

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**The Ingathering of the Exiles**

The idea of a remnant surviving the destruction which the prophets foresaw dates back to the eighth century. The four major prophets of this period are Amos, and Hosea in the northern kingdom of Israel, and Micah and Isaiah in the southern kingdom of Judah. But remember that only the first half of the book of Isaiah as we presently have it (with the possible exception of Chapters 24 to 27 which most scholars believe to have been written at a much later date) can be assigned to this period. We shall be looking at these prophets and their work in the eighth century more closely in Lessons 9 and 10. For the moment we are simply noting that the concept of a remnant surviving the time of destruction is clearly there in the prophecies of Isaiah before the fall of Samaria in 722 BC or the invasion of Judah by the Assyrians which threatened Jerusalem in the latter part of that century.

Isaiah exercised his ministry during this time, during the reign of Hezekiah which is well documented in 2 Chronicles 29 - 32.

Using a concordance look up the word ‘remnant’ and note the references in Isaiah Amos and Micah. Particularly notice Isaiah 10: 20-27.

It was out of this understanding of a remnant surviving a time of destruction and exile that the concept of a ‘time of restoration’ was born. Jeremiah writes movingly of such a time in chapters 30 -33. He says ‘He

who scattered Israel will gather them and will watch over his flock like a shepherd' (31: 10). In 31: 7 he cries out to God to save the remnant of Israel by which he does not simply mean Judah but the whole nation of Israel north and south of the border. In fact Jeremiah saw the time coming when the divided nation would become one again. This forms part of his vision of the new covenant in 31: 31. That covenant would be made with both the house of Israel and the house of Judah, and God would use the exile both as a time of cleansing and a time of healing of division. The ingathering of the exiles would be a time of replanting the nation on a new covenantal basis.

### Question 5

Give an example of a prophecy that links together the concepts of a 'Day of the Lord', a 'Remnant' and the 'Return' or 'Ingathering' of the people from exile.

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### The Messianic Age

The exile was a period of fundamental change for the people of Israel. In the teaching of the earlier prophets of Israel such as Elijah and Elisha there is no hint of a messianic hope. The expectation was entirely nationalistic; that God would watch over the nation whom he had called to be his people. Provided they obeyed the terms of the covenant and did not fall into idolatry he would ensure peace and prosperity.

The first hint of a Messianic hope comes with the great prophets of the eighth century during the time of the threatened catastrophe of Assyrian conquest. Isaiah believed that God would intervene and save the nation provided there was repentance and turning to him in complete trust. The prophecy in Isaiah 7 during the reign of Ahaz is the earliest mention of a Messianic hope. This appears to be centered upon the birth of a child who would be a great redeemer and would lead the nation's defence. In Isaiah 9 the expected child is said to be a descendant of David. In chapter 11 the Messianic king is seen to be inaugurating a new age of righteousness and of peace and prosperity.

Micah, also prophesying in the same period as Isaiah, declares that the king is to come from Bethlehem (5: 2-5) and thus is of Davidic origin.

One hundred years later, during the reign of Josiah, Jeremiah also spoke about 'a righteous branch' coming from David's line (33: 15). Jeremiah linked this Messianic hope to the time of restoration following the exile when the nation would be restored to the land and God would restore the fortunes of the nation. This time of restoration Jeremiah also linked with the establishment of a new covenant which would replace the old Sinai covenant which had been broken by the sinfulness of the nation.

It was the experience of exile itself which transformed the Messianic hopes of the people from the narrow nationalism of earlier days to a broad universalism in which Israel was seen as the servant of the Lord. The great servant passages in Isaiah 42 to 53 give a wonderful picture of God's intention to redeem fallen mankind and to recreate the whole of the created order. Whether these servant passages refer to an individual or are meant to depict the personification of the nation is still a matter of theological interpretation upon which there is no agreement among scholars. Rabbinic teaching has traditionally seen the servant as 'the nation Israel' cleansed, purified and suffering on behalf of all the nations of the world. Christian theologians, by contrast, have found it easy to see in such passages as Isaiah 53 the person of Jesus as the suffering servant of God redeeming the world through his blood.

However we interpret particular passages in the prophetic writings, it is undoubtedly true to say that the messianic hope runs right the way through the prophetic tradition of Israel.

**Question 6**

Summarise the prophetic understanding of a 'messianic hope' for Israel.

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**The Conversion of the Gentiles**

The new universalism in the teaching of the prophets which was borne out of the experience of exile runs right the way through post-exilic literature. It is most vividly and beautifully expressed in the middle chapters of Isaiah, chapters 40 to 55. They declare that there is only one God who is the Creator and Redeemer of all things. All other gods are but a figment of the imagination. 'I am the first and I am the last; apart from me there is no God' (Isaiah 44: 6). This is the faith with which Israel emerged from the exile 'before me no God was formed, nor will there be one after me. I, even I am the Lord, and apart from me there is no Saviour. I have revealed and saved and proclaimed' (Isaiah 43: 10b -12a). That passage continues 'You are my witnesses, declares the Lord, that I am God.' That, in fact, was the task which God had given to the returning remnant of his people.

In the post-exilic period there is no further mention among the prophets of idolatry. The exile cleansed them from their obsession with false gods. They came out of exile with the recognition that God was not simply confined to the little bit of territory known as Israel or Judah, but that he was the one universal omniscient and omnipresent God, Creator of the whole universe, who held all the nations in his hands.

It was with such conviction that the prophet was able to declare that God actually raised up Cyrus as 'his anointed one' to carry out his purposes of overthrowing Babylon and releasing the remnant of his people to return to Judah. His purposes would stand for ever (Isaiah 46: 10-11). God would carry out all that he had planned and his intention was the conversion of the Gentiles.

God's ultimate purpose was to use the remnant of his people as his servants among all the nations. That purpose is beautifully expressed in Isaiah 49: 6 'to restore the tribes of Jacob and bring back those of Israel I have kept. I will also make you a light for the Gentiles that you may bring my salvation to the ends of the earth.'

**Question 7**

Find a passage that links the messianic hope with mission to the Gentiles.

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**Eschatological and Apocalyptic Concepts**

The notes on this section in the textbook are quite adequate for our present purposes. This is an immense subject about which numerous volumes have been written. We cannot hope to summarise the eschatological and apocalyptic concepts in a few sentences. Note the four chief elements referred to in the textbook, that of resurrection, judgment of the nations, cosmic destruction, and the reign of God.

The most beautiful expressions of God's ultimate purpose in establishing his messianic reign on earth are to be seen in the pictorial description in Micah 4 and Isaiah 2 as well as in Isaiah 65 and 66. These passages give expression to the hope of Israel to which we have just been referring in the middle chapters of Isaiah, where it is foreseen that God will ultimately establish his authority over the nations and bring the knowledge of his salvation to all peoples. Such is still the hope of the nations.

For Christians, this messianic hope has not only been firmly fixed in the person of Jesus but in the expectation of his return to earth. Thus in his first coming Jesus our Messiah brought the knowledge of salvation and made that salvation possible for all believers. In his second coming he will bring justice to the nations and establish his reign upon the earth. It is, however, the subject of another course of study to examine the eschatology of the New Testament and its roots in the Hebraic scriptures.

**Question 8**

Give an example from the prophets of cosmic destruction as an eschatological concept.

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**Assignment**

Write an essay of not more than 1,000 words using the title “The Day of the Lord’. Your essay should illustrate the different concepts and usages of the term.

### Answers for Lesson 6

1. To warn the nation of danger and call them back to God.
2. There is a great many such prophecies. A good example is Amos 7: 9-11. This was fulfilled in the lifetime of those who heard the prophecy.
3. There are many such prophecies. The classic example is Isaiah 2: 1-5 which is as yet unfulfilled.
4. Hosea 2: 14-23 gives a beautiful picture of God establishing a new covenantal relationship with Israel. That Day, will be a time of 'righteousness, justice, compassion and love' when Israel will be betrothed to the Lord in love. By contrast Amos declares that the Day of the Lord will be 'a day of darkness and not of light' (Amos 5: 18).
5. A good example is found in Micah 4: 6-8. All three elements - 'Day of the Lord,' 'remnant' and 'return to the land' - are to be found in this prophecy.
6. The hope of Israel in the prophets was for a redeemer who would lead the nation into an age of righteousness when the full covenantal blessings of God would be experienced. In time this hope became extended to include Gentiles as the messianic age was soon to embrace the whole world.
7. Isaiah 42: 6-9, is the best example.
8. Isaiah 24: 1-6 is a good example although there are many more such as Isaiah 66: 15 or Zechariah 14: 1-15.