

## Unit 1 Introduction

# How the Prophets Point to Jesus

How can we be sure the Old Testament prophets do point to Jesus? Most Christians are happy to accept a word from Jesus himself, and on this issue, we have Jesus' own affirmation. Luke 24:13-35 reports Cleopas and another disciple walking to Emmaus, west of Jerusalem, late on the day of Jesus' resurrection. Jesus joined them, but they did not recognize Him; He asked about their conversation. They told Him of their dismay that the One they had thought would deliver Israel had allowed himself to be crucified. Jesus responded with a fairly stern rebuke (v. 25-26); then "beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, He explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself" (v. 27). The prophets and the rest of the Old Testament Scriptures do speak of Jesus—often "only" broadly and implicitly, but sometimes explicitly, also. We have His word for it.

What Scriptures did Jesus discuss with the two Emmaus-bound disciples? Luke identified them as "Moses and all the Prophets." The Hebrew-language arrangement of the Old Testament is in three major divisions: Torah ("Instruction"), which Christians usually call the Pentateuch; Prophets; and Writings. The New Testament often refers to the Torah as "Moses." The second major division, the Prophets, has two sub-sections. The "Former Prophets" includes most of what Christians today usually call the "Historical Books." The "Latter Prophets" are Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and The Twelve, or what Christians usually call "The Minor Prophets." Though Luke did not name the third major section, "the Writings," both travelers (and Luke's early readers) knew the phrase "Moses and the Prophets" could stand for the entirety of Scripture. Implicitly, at least, Jesus reviewed all the Old Testament with and for them.

### *The Latter Prophets: The "Big Three" and the "Little Twelve"*

The focus of the quarter is the Latter Prophets, containing most of what believers usually think of as biblical prophecy. Chronologically, they were clustered around three major historical crises. Hosea and Amos prophesied primarily to the northern kingdom of Israel, while Isaiah (first of the "Big Three") and Micah focused on Judah. The ministries of these four partially overlapped; their period was the late eighth and early seventh centuries BC, when Assyria put an end to national Israel (721 BC), and Judah barely escaped the same fate (701 BC).

Judah continued as the lone Hebrew kingdom through the seventh century. As the century turned, good King Josiah's evil sons and grandson plunged Judah into a final apostasy. Jeremiah in Jerusalem and Ezekiel among those already exiled to Babylon (the others of

the "Big Three") called for a repentance which did not come. Among the "Little Twelve," Obadiah, Nahum, Habakkuk, and Zephaniah also prophesied briefly in Jerusalem at this time.

The third crisis, though posing its own perils, featured the return and restoration of exiles who believed God's promises, took their courage in their hands, and returned to Judah. Haggai and part of Zechariah urged completion of the temple's rebuilding. The rest of Zechariah and Malachi, and probably Joel, also, addressed issues arising later in the Post-Exilic community.

The point of this brief overview is to remind ourselves that God called the prophets first to address their own historical times and circumstances. We shall see throughout the quarter that the prophets—and other Scripture, also—do point us to Jesus. However, to comprehend fully the richness and depth of that aspect of God's prophetic words through them, we need to keep in mind the BC Israel and Judah who first heard them.

### *Prophecy as Prescription and Prediction*

A discussion almost as old as the church is whether God intends biblical prophecy to be "forthtelling" or "foretelling." The correct answer (with appropriate qualification) is, "both." In one way or another, the whole Bible is forthtelling/instruction/prescription for God's people; this includes the whole of the Latter Prophets. On the other hand, much of the content of the Latter Prophets (and of some other biblical passages) also is foretelling, or predictive.

An important point: Most biblical prediction is conditional—because it is intended also as prescription, as instruction in godly living. Usually translated "prophet," Hebrew *nabi'* (nah-VEE) more specifically means "spokesman/spokeswoman." God's prophets worked to persuade Israel and Judah: Repent, and enjoy the shalom/flourishing God intends for all creation. Continue in apostasy, and experience the inevitable consequences of brokenness and destruction. Ezekiel 33:11 is God's own eloquent lament, "Why will you die, people of Israel?" Jeremiah 18:1-12 is a particularly vivid interpretation/commentary of this kind of conditional prediction, at once down-to-earth, and profoundly theological.

### *How Prophecy as Prediction Points to Jesus*

Not all biblical prophetic predictions are/were conditional. A significant number of very important unconditional predictions occur in the Latter Prophets, with others also scattered elsewhere in the Old Testament. Several times in the Latter Prophets, God even said, in effect, "This is how you can recognize me: I am the God who makes

promises (predictions) ahead of time, then keeps them. No other so-called “god” can do that!” (See, e.g., Isaiah 41:21-29.)

Understandably, many unconditional predictions concern the coming Messiah/Redeemer who, as history revealed, was Jesus. Familiar examples in the Latter Prophets include Isaiah 9:1-7; 11:1-5; 49:1-7; 52:13—53:12; Micah 5:2; and Zechariah 9:9-10.

It is important to acknowledge that most of these prophetic predictions were not readily recognizable as applying to Jesus at times throughout His life, including during His Passion, when circumstances and/or actions brought them to reality as “fulfilled” predictive prophecies. This is obvious in the response of the Emmaus two to Jesus’ question as He first encountered them on the road, “We had hoped that he was the one who was going to redeem Israel” (Luke 24:21). In the first century, the primary obstacle to seeing Jesus as the fulfillment of God’s messianic promises was that most of the Jewish people hoping for the Messiah’s appearance expected a military conqueror who would defeat the Romans in battle, throw them out of the Jewish homeland, and restore the glories of David’s ancient kingdom.

In Jesus’ infancy, the magi came to Jerusalem, “naturally” expecting a king to be born in a palace; Jerusalem was where Herod’s Judean palace was. Jerusalem’s biblical scholars did their research and finally noticed, or remembered, that Micah 5:2 predicted insignificant Bethlehem, five miles south of Jerusalem, would be the hometown of the Coming One. Only in hindsight did that make sense to Matthew, who recorded it in his gospel (Matthew 2:3-6). David, Israel’s greatest king, had come from Bethlehem, yet the connection was not obvious to most at the time.

Partly because Jesus did not come as the expected conquering hero of this world’s battlefields and palaces, even those close to Him missed virtually all these predictions, even when He alerted them ahead of time. Of course, we cannot know whether He did, but Jesus easily could have referenced the Suffering Servant of Isaiah 53 as He began to tell His most intimate followers He soon would suffer and die at the hands of the Jerusalem priests who were, after all, in charge of temple sacrifices (Matthew 16:21). Yet, because it did not fit his paradigm, Peter began to rebuke Jesus. Only afterward did he and the others begin to understand the meaning of these prophecies.

Similarly, Matthew later connected Zechariah 9:9-10 with Jesus’ triumphal entry into Jerusalem riding a donkey, a mount symbolizing peace, rather than a war horse or a horse-drawn chariot (Matthew 21:4-5). In the meantime, most of those in the crowd with Jesus would have been happy on that day to see Him begin an insurrection against their Roman overlords. This is one instance among many of

the Gospel writers mentioning an event, then referencing a specific Old Testament prophecy of which they now (much later) understood that event as a fulfillment.

#### *How Prophecy as Prescription Points to Jesus*

In its character as teaching/instruction/prescription, all prophecy points to Jesus even more importantly than does the relatively small percentage of prophecies just noted—i.e., the unconditional predictive prophecies foretelling His (first or second) coming. All Scripture—Torah, Prophets, Writings and, since the first century, the New Testament—point to and acquaint us with God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit.

This is incomprehensible to us, steeped as we are in our first parents’ choice to turn their backs on God, the choice we all have ratified for ourselves. Personally alienated, we can be convinced of the verity of God’s redemptive intentions toward us only by God’s radical step of personally joining our race. From His conception in Mary’s womb until forever, the Trinity’s “Second” now is fully God and fully human. This is the grand theme of the biblical symphony. Father, Son, and Spirit composed and perform it together, from eternity to eternity. Scripture is at least the beginning of its score; perhaps it is more. Teaching us about God, the Prophets point us to Jesus. Answering Philip’s request to “show us the Father,” Jesus said, “Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father” (John 14:8-9).

In Hosea 11:8, God asked poignantly, “How can I give you up, Ephraim?” Jesus willingly stretched out His arms on Calvary’s cross, and said, “I can’t!”

In Isaiah 49:6, God said it would be too small a thing for the Servant to redeem Israel only. God would showcase the Servant’s true abilities by making Him “a light for the Gentiles [all peoples], that my salvation may reach to the ends of the earth.” Who now can doubt the good news of Jesus soon will reach the ends of the earth—if it has not done so already?

In Jonah 4:11, God asked His reluctant, irascible prophet, “Should I not have concern” even for wicked Nineveh, Israel’s arch-enemy at the time? In the Person of Jesus, God eschewed vengeance upon every “Nineveh,” embracing instead the shameful death of the cross and converting it to an unfading glory. He now invites anyone and everyone to follow Him through the cross and the tomb, into His eternal resurrection, into God’s forever family.

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