

He Gave Us Prophets

Lesson 1

Essential Hermeneutical
Perspectives

Forum



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Lesson One: Essential Hermeneutical Perspectives

Faculty Forum

With

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Question 1:

What makes prophetic books so difficult to understand?

Mr. Sherif Atef Fahim, translation

At least two issues make prophetic books so difficult to understand. First, readers don't know the details well for most of the events related to the prophetic books. This is different, for example, from approaches to the Pentateuch. In the Pentateuch, when we read the story of Joseph in the book of Genesis, the readers can easily follow the sequence of the story: Joseph was sold; he went to Egypt; he was imprisoned and then became the second-ranked man in Egypt. The details are clear. But in the prophetic books, there are many events. There are numerous kings and more than one exile. There is the Assyrian exile and the Babylonian exile. The Babylonian exile occurred in three stages. So, because of the many details, people get lost as they read the text. This creates difficulty for us. The second issue that makes understanding the prophetic books difficult is the extensive imagery and metaphors used in the prophetic books, especially since these metaphors are related to the time when these books were written. For example, in Isaiah 5, we read the parable of the vineyard. It's important to understand agriculture methods of that time, the terms used, and the tools used, to be able to understand what exactly the writer wants to say. These two issues make the prophetic books difficult to understand.

Dr. Carol Kaminski

The prophetic books are wonderful rich literature, and yet, at the same time, they're also difficult to understand. And I think there's a couple of reasons for that. I think, first of all, the language itself that's used seems strange. It's very unfamiliar to us. And because the language from the Prophets is coming from Mosaic covenant, we don't always know that, we've got to go back to Mosaic covenant to try and understand how the language itself is being used. So, there's unusual language being used.

I think the second issue is that you have the historical context. It's hard to work out because there are so many prophets. We have a northern kingdom and southern kingdom. We have about twenty northern kings and about twenty southern kings, and we've got to put the Prophets somewhere in that context. If we don't do it, we won't understand their message. For example, if we know that the northern kingdom — which was for two hundred years — that they're worshipping idols. You know, we have them at Dan and Bethel. We have the golden calves and have Baal worship as well as other idols. If we know that for the historical context, and I know that Hosea is a northern prophet in the northern kingdom, when I read about the idolatry that's taking place, I immediately know the message of the book because I understand the context. So, I think it's hard for people to understand the historical context.

I think the third thing I would say, too, in understanding the Prophets and why it's difficult, is that the prophets are speaking to their immediate circumstances, particularly whether it's the northern or southern; they are directly speaking to their immediate circumstances. But they're also speaking beyond their immediate circumstances to a time of restoration, which is after the exile. And what is interesting, what happens with that, then, *after* the exile they come back, all the things that the prophets had said would happen, that some things have happened, but they haven't happened in full. And in fact, therefore, those prophetic texts still are hoped for the future. So, then they get picked up in the New Testament. So, if you think of that, we have a prophetic text. We've got to look at the immediate historical circumstances, we've got to look at the time of restoration when they come back from exile, and we have to look at the time of the New Testament to see where are the places that those prophetic texts are fulfilled. Like, Matthew says, "out of Egypt I called my son," from Hosea, saying that's fulfillment in Jesus. So, we've got to have that layer. And then if I add one more layer, then we've got to think, sometimes the words from the prophets don't come to fulfillment in the New Testament, but it's a future; it might be the day of the Lord in terms of the final judgment. So, we need to have some sensitivity to these different places of fulfillment, and we want to really stay with the biblical text. And when there's quotations in the New Testament that go back to a prophet, we want to be very careful to be aware of those, because again, New Testament writers, book of Revelation, they're going back to the Prophets for their categories. So, I think we've got to think of language, we've got to think of historical context, and then we've got to think of the prophetic immediate — where is this being fulfilled, and who are they speaking to? So, it's well worth it because these are wonderful books, but we do need to give a little bit of extra attention to these issues.

Dr. Douglas Gropp

The prophetic books are particularly difficult to understand for a number of reasons. One of the main reasons is that most of the prophetic books are written in poetry, and Hebrew poetry is a lot more difficult to understand than Hebrew prose for a number of reasons, including the differences in syntax, differences in vocabulary. We might be able to understand all the words and still not be able to put them together in a meaning that we can be really confident of... The organization of prophetic books is

not like the way Western literature is organized. It doesn't have such a clear logical structure or even a chronological structure. It does have structure of its own, but a lot of times, the structure is based on formal cues that we wouldn't regard as very logical cues. We would regard them as superficial. There's transitions between speakers. Sometimes we don't know, the text will say "I," and we won't know who's speaking, or "you," and we won't know who's being addressed. As part of being poetic, the books are full of images and metaphors that shift and change in almost a dreamlike fashion that makes it hard for us to follow.

Still another reason why the prophetic books are difficult to understand is just the nature, the mysterious nature to us of prophetic inspiration. Prophets saw themselves as speaking the very words of God. They weren't their own words. They were authoritative messengers, diplomats from the Lord, and they weren't speaking their own words. And that's very difficult for us to understand, even though we can compare ... prophets like Jeremiah and Ezekiel and analyze their language and see, well, they have a lot of similar themes to one another, but they speak a very different language. So, we could say that the language of Jeremiah very much reflects the personality of Jeremiah, or the language of Ezekiel very much reflects the personality of Ezekiel. And yet, those prophets were very conscious that those words were nevertheless not their own words, but the words of the Lord.

Dr. Donna Petter

Prophetic book literature is very difficult to understand, and I would say for three, really three main reasons. First of all, the designation of the genre itself that derives from the text is misleading because, when you think "prophetic," you tend to think predictions of the future *only*. But the prophetic literature as a literary slice is way more than just prediction. And anyone who were to pick up the Prophets and read it would see that. But, so, the overall designation — "prophetic literature" — is almost a deterrent for people understanding what this block is about because it is way more than just prediction in nature. So that's the first thing.

But the second thing that makes predictive literature, or prophecy, hard to understand initially, or difficult to grasp, is because of the very genre itself. If you were to pick up Amos or Hosea, for example, you will soon see that it is filled with poetic language. And, by nature, poetic language means it utilizes a lot of figures of speech, and it also utilizes a lot of parallelism. So, when I say figures of speech, we're talking about metaphorical language, we're talking about similes, comparisons, contrasts, and we're also talking about hyperbolic language, and that makes it hard for *any* reader, in *any* time, to figure out what is the meaning of that figure of speech. And so, it's almost like it's a two-step process because you're figuring out what this figure of speech is, and then you're trying to understand meaning beyond that. The other reason it's difficult in terms of the literary genre has to do with the fact that that same genre that utilizes a lot of figures of speech also uses parallelism. So, one line could be repeating itself right after the other; one line could be in contrast to the other line; and so, the reader has to follow that carefully, because a lot of concepts are actually

being repeated twice. And so, in that sense, the genre of the prophetic literature is tricky...

And I think the third reason that I would say why prophetic literature is challenging and difficult to understand has to do with the very thing called the “predictive element” that’s involved in so many prophecies, because everybody’s asking, “when?” When does this take place? So, for example, Ezekiel 40–48 talks about a new temple that’s going to come on the scene. Everybody just wants to know, well, when is this? When’s this going to happen? Did it already happen, or when will it happen? And therefore, that is a really challenging piece when one considers prophetic literature overall.

Question 2:

Did the Holy Spirit dictate his revelations to the prophets?

Dr. Daniel B. Wallace

One of the things that we wrestle with when we think about the Holy Spirit inspiring Scripture is, well, how exactly did he do this? Really, in many respects, it’s a mystery, but there are some things we can say he *didn’t* do. One of the things we know he didn’t do is he did not dictate the words to these authors. The Holy Spirit was not looking for good stenographers, but holy men to write Scripture. How do we know that? Well, you can compare the Hebrew, say for example, of Isaiah and Hosea. Isaiah is kind of like the Shakespeare of the Old Testament. Some have estimated that he had a vocabulary of something approaching thirty thousand words. That’s just unbelievable. Hosea, vocabulary of maybe five hundred words. I mean, these are wide differences in the variety of how they wrote... These authors used their own personalities fully in the writing of Scripture. They used their own skills in writing... The author is involved in the learning that God has taken him through for years, and you don’t have these authors writing down what God is dictating, except on very few occasions, like when Moses wrote down the Ten Commandments. But they’re using their personalities, their gifts, their talents, their backgrounds, their language skills, their *research* skills. When they write the gospels they’re not sitting down in a room saying, “Okay, Spirit of God, tell me what Jesus did, and I’ll just copy down what you tell me.” That’s not at all what happened.

Dr. Riad Kassis

Many would think that God was dictating to a secretary who was just typing what God was saying, and that was the prophet. But I think God, who created our personalities and gave us brains and mind and gave us a culture to live in, has directed the prophets in the Old Testament using their personalities, their understanding, their knowledge in a way, through the Holy Spirit, to convey his message to us. So, I think God did not dictate word-by-word, but he used the knowledge, the personality of the prophets of the Old Testament.

Dr. David B. Garner

As you look at the total package of both Old and New Testaments together, one of the themes that stands out is that God's people are fully aware that Scripture is nothing less than God's very own words to his people. They are also aware that Scripture has come to them through prophets, through apostles, and that God has used the mouthpieces of humans to deliver his Word as well as to pen his Word. In more recent years, there have been questions that have risen to the surface in terms of, well, then, are we saying that human authors had no role whatsoever in Scripture? Is this almost like the human authors are a robot that simply pen what they hear? Well, there are certain places in Scripture in which we find almost precisely that, in which God says something, the prophet hears it, and he writes it down. It is that explicit. I think of the Ten Commandments as a prime example of that. I think there's also a broader issue here in terms of the way in which we think about God using human words. God is completely other than we are, and the use of words is actually an act of God's condescending kindness to us. And when you look at a passage like 2 Peter 1, especially verses 16-21, we find Peter describing Scripture as something that is wholly divine, but he uses the agent of the human to write it down. It is quite true that Peter understands that the human author is not just passively involved but very actively involved... So, the human author is actually actively involved, and he's thinking, he's writing, but in all of that, the Holy Spirit is superintending so that what is written is precisely what God wants to be written, albeit using the various personalities, experiences, cultural and contextual dynamics that are ever present at the time that the human author is writing.

Question 3: **What is organic inspiration?**

Dr. Gregg R. Allison

The Holy Spirit and the human authors, the authors of Scripture, work together in organic inspiration. As the biblical author is writing, the Holy Spirit is coming alongside and moving, prompting that biblical author to write what we now call the Word of God. So, there was a confluence, a coming together, a writing together of the Spirit who was superintending the writing process and the biblical author, like Moses or Isaiah or Paul, who was the actual writer of Scripture, this cooperative effort, so that the Spirit and the biblical authors composed Scripture together.

Pastor Ornan Cruz, translation

It's interesting to look at how the Holy Spirit can work with human beings. We all can discern a little of the great difference that exists between God and all of our human limitations, made even more pronounced by our sin. But at the same time, it's very exciting to see how God gives his revelation in the midst of a human context without altering the culture or the author's own customs. In other words, divine inspiration doesn't change or nullify the culture or the values of the writer. So, the writings were brought to the original audience in their *own* context, in their *own*

culture, and with the values of the person writing. This made it so that the original audience could understand God's message much more easily. If God had spoken in his own great language, how could we understand it? This is what we've called "divine accommodation." To illustrate, think about pastors today. We all preach God's Word in our own context, with our own words and using our own personalities. We want people to understand God's message, and we use the resources that are available to us to make this possible. Now, our great goal is that God's Word remains unchanged. In the Old Testament, human authors held to the great precept that God's Word remained unchanged, even when there was a human component used as a means to help the first audience understand. And that's the way we do it today. And I have great admiration for how God, with all of his greatness, can reveal his will through all of us, particularly through the human authors who wrote the Scriptures.

Dr. Mark Gignilliat

The Holy Spirit worked through the personality and the perspective of the particular prophet that he was dealing with. I guess that the traditional framework for understanding that theologically is "organic inspiration," that God works through his servants, through his prophets, and uses their personality, uses their particular point of view, uses their education, and the lack thereof, for his purposes. I guess one could also think about using the doctrine of sanctification and understanding how God takes things that are human, earthly and physical, and sanctifies them for his own purposes to use them for his own means, and he does that with the prophets as well... God uses who they were, and didn't override their personalities in bringing forth his prophetic word for both Israel — ancient Israel — and the church.

Question 4:

To what extent did the prophets understand their own prophecies?

Dr. Douglas Gropp

That question — to what extent do the prophets understand their own prophecies? — gets right to the heart of this mystery of the inspiration of prophecy, how the words that the prophets speak in their own consciousness are God's words and not their own, so that, what's first and foremost important is God's intentions in those words, whether the prophets understood them or not. But I think we should believe that as they're prophesying they also understand a lot of the import of what they're saying. First Peter 1:10 and following address this question fairly explicitly, that the prophets had an inkling, at least, of what they were prophesying about, but were still searching for who and what and where these prophecies would be fulfilled. I think part of the nature of prophecy is, or a large part of prophecy is, that the prophecies themselves are generated out of prior promises that God had revealed, particularly the promise, the threefold promise to Abraham of seed, land and a blessing to the nations, and ... the promise to the house of David that God would adopt David's son as his son; he would be a father to him, he would not take his covenant loyalty away from his son, and that his son would build a temple in Jerusalem. Out of those two cardinal

promises, we could say, in the Old Testament, all of the rich and varied pictures of the salvation, restoration that the prophets proclaim are just so many instantiations, realizations of those promises... We might call the prophets “painters” of the impressionistic school. They’re using as the paints in their palette previous deliverances from Israel like the exodus, the promises to Abraham, the promises to David, and they’re projecting those forward in an impressionistic way, and they are referring to a real future which will come about, but a future that’s not to be understood necessarily in a literalistic way as corresponding in any sort of one-to-one way to the images that they use in depicting that future.

Mr. Sherif Atef Fahim, translation

The Old Testament prophets, to some extent, understood their own prophecies. It’s a common mistake to think that they didn’t understand anything, as if they received words they didn’t understand, or that they were just typewriters who didn’t comprehend what they wrote. But this is not true... They understood what they were writing. They had a special understanding of the historical, literal contexts in which they lived, the historical circumstances in which they lived. For example, in the book of Hosea, it says, “out of Egypt I called my son.” We know from Matthew that this prophecy was fulfilled in Christ when he returned from Egypt. Although Hosea might not have known that what he wrote was about Christ, he understood that the Lord was talking about how he rescued his people from Egypt during the time of the exodus. So, the prophets understood what they wrote. Even though they didn’t have the full understanding that we have through the New Testament, they understood to a large extent what they wrote.

Dr. Mike Ross

When we study the prophets, it’s often asked, did these men really understand everything they were talking about? And the answer is, I think generally, yes. First of all, they were forthtelling. They were speaking forth the word of God into their own historical context. So, they were dealing with social issues and issues of spiritual nature, foreign religions, idolatry, spiritual decline in their own country. They were dealing with political issues. World events were surrounding them and swirling in and out of their lives and they understood that context as much as a preacher today does. They also had some idea that there was a second venue for their prophecy. They were looking down the corridors of time to some figure they knew as the Anointed One or the Messiah. And they did have an understanding that this prophecy that they were saying to the people in their context had some futuristic fulfillment as well. The third dimension I think they also understood, they had this idea of the great “day of the Lord.” That could be a catastrophic event in their own time. For example, when Joel talks about the day of the Lord coming and this locust plague that would happen in just a few years within his lifetime. Or the day of the Lord when the Messiah arrives. And then finally, there was a day of the Lord way down the corridors of history for the end of time, the consummation of the ages. And they seemed to understand that there was a glorious restoration that was going to take place, not just historically in their context, but for the whole creation and for the kingdom of God, and some victorious, final cataclysmic event where this messianic figure would restore all the

creation to its original intended order and purpose. And I think, perhaps with decreasing clarity, they understood these three venues, but they did know that they were speaking for God. Thus they said all the time, “Thus saith the Lord.”

Dr. Russel T. Fuller

Well, the prophets did understand some of their own prophecies, I think, especially the ones that were fulfilled in their own day. So, for instance, when Joel is talking about a coming locust plague and so forth, he would be there in his own day to see the fulfillment of it. So, there's no question that the prophets had a pretty good understanding of their prophecies, especially those that were going to happen in the near future. Now, for those prophecies, however, that were going to be for a more distant future, they had some difficulties with that. The New Testament tells us that. Peter talks about how that the prophets were making careful search and inquiry about their own prophecies, trying to put these things together, investigating things like, you know, what manner of time or what kind of person it was that was going to fulfill their prophecies. So, certain aspects of their prophecies, I think they understood very well; other aspects of their own prophecies, a little different and more difficult.

Question 5:

Why is it important to search for the original meaning of biblical passages?

Rev. Michael J. Glodo

Searching for the original meaning in biblical passages is critical because that's where our basis of divine authority is. If we don't know what God intended in a passage of the Bible, then we can't say what its meaning is for us today. So, original meaning is a critical starting point for making modern application. And, in fact, saying the Bible means things that are contradictory to or even outside of original meaning can be one of the most unhelpful and even self-serving things that people do in the church.

Dr. Dennis E. Johnson

Knowing the original meaning of a biblical passage helps us to apply it to our own lives because we recognize that a key component to its original meaning is understanding its original purpose, that is, the change that God designed that text to accomplish in its first audience, in its first readers — in the light of their situation, in the light of their frame of reference, how much of Scripture they knew at that point or had access to, in the light of the trials, the temptations that they were facing — that was God's application to them. The meaning, really, was serving the purpose of effecting his Holy Spirit's sanctifying purpose in their lives. Well, the Spirit's purpose in their lives is in continuity with the Holy Spirit's purpose in our lives. So, the more we can understand their situation, their need, and therefore, the purpose for which God gave that text in the original setting and to the original audience, that sets a trajectory for how the Spirit intends to apply that text in our life and our situation. And that should be our guide as pastors, preachers, teachers in the way we apply the

text. We ask, how did God intend it to make a change, to make a difference in their lives then, and then how does that carry over into the Holy Spirit's purpose in conforming us more and more to the image of Christ today?

Question 6:

Why should we avoid reading the prophetic texts atomistically, or in isolation from their literary context?

Dr. Richard L. Pratt, Jr.

I think a lot of times when Christians read Old Testament prophets they face a very serious problem, and that is, at first blush, it's not like reading the book of Galatians or the book of Ephesians, which sort of easily make sense to us. We're familiar with them. We know them. We can kind of read one verse and see how it connects to the next and that sort of thing. But when it comes to prophets — Old Testament prophets — we're so unfamiliar with what they say that it's hard to read big chunks of it. It's hard to read chapters upon chapters upon chapters and see how the thought flows from one verse to the next, to the next, to the next. And so, what we end up doing is doing our best to understand what they say, but we end up getting stuck on tiny little pieces, often the tiny little pieces that the New Testament quotes; that sort of is often our entry into the prophets. But we'll focus on maybe one verse, maybe two and say, "What does this mean?" Well, anytime you take one or two verses of the Bible, or one or two sentences out of a conversation, and isolate all your attention on that tiny little bit of a conversation or a part of the Bible, then you're going to easily misunderstand what's being said. The best way to understand what's said in a little piece of the Bible, a verse or two, is to understand how that little piece fits into the larger context. And believe it or not, if you do the hard work, you can actually see that the flow of Old Testament prophetic books makes sense, that there actually is structure to it, that there actually is a literary pattern that you can follow. The logic of it is there. And when you get those pieces of logic, those larger chunks of logic in the prophetic word, then you can go back to those little tiny verses, those one or two lines that you may be familiar with because you heard it somewhere or because you saw it in the New Testament, you can go back to those little pieces, and you can make better sense out of them, because when the New Testament writers, when Jesus and his apostles and prophets, when they refer to Old Testament prophecy, they often just did little snippets, but they referred to those snippets in the light of the larger context that they knew very well from where they lived in their day, because they had been taught the prophets, and they knew better than simply to read a verse in isolation. But rather than quote the whole chapter, they quote the key verse that fit with what they were trying to say at that particular time. But for you and me, when we go back to those little snippets out of the Old Testament, we need to do what Jesus and early Christians were able to do, and that is stick it back into its context and understand what it meant in its literary arrangement within the prophetic book.

Dr. Craig S. Keener

Interpreters today often will read texts apart from their literary context. One example of that in the Prophets is how people often interpret Ezekiel 28. I mean, Ezekiel 28 in context with Ezekiel 27 — it's in a series of oracles against nations — 27 and 28 are oracles against the prince of Tyre, but this prince of Tyre exalts himself, as ancient kings often did, acts as if he's divine, and so it addresses him as like, "you've made yourself a god." It calls him a covering cherub in the garden, in God's garden. And it goes on to talk about how he will die the death of a man in the heart of the seas — which is where Tyre was actually located at that point; it was an island kingdom — and how the wealth and the wisdom of Tyre would be brought to nothing. Well, people often say that that must be referring to Satan because Satan was a cherub in the Garden of Eden. Aside from the fact that, in Genesis 3:24, the cherubim were actually good characters in the Garden of Eden, they say, well, but no, it has to be a supernatural being because it says it's in the Garden of Eden. Well, if you read further in the context ... you find out that Pharaoh was a tree in God's garden, and all these kings are called trees in God's garden. It's figurative language. And if we don't read the whole context, we won't get that.

Dr. Carol Kaminski

When it comes to interpreting the Prophets and preaching from the Prophets, I think one of the things that happens in the contemporary culture is that we're not always sure where the Prophets fit in historical narrative. And if you look at the Prophets, you've got sixteen prophetic books. The Prophets are not written in chronological order, so that makes it difficult to put them in their historical context. In fact, it looks like the Prophets are grouped according to the length of the book, so therefore, for someone who's preaching from the Prophets, they have to do additional work to try and put it in its historical context and in its literary context. So, that's a lot of work to do that, and so what people tend to do is pull out Bible verses. They will take it in isolation, not being in the historical context of the book or in the literary context. And an example you see is, I often hear sermons from Joel that God will restore what the locust has eaten, and it is taken to be a promise that, you know, if you've had difficult things in your life that God is going to restore that. And again, if you look at within the book of Joel in its own literary context, no, the locusts are referring to the Babylonian army that's coming. It has a historical context, and of course theological context. So, it is referring to the Babylonians coming against — the locusts is potentially a real plague of locusts or it might be simply a metaphor for the army. So, when God is saying he is going to restore that, it's speaking about the restoration coming after the exile, that there is going to be a restoration time. And so it's not speaking about a personal promise of individual restoration, but it's speaking about a promise of corporate restoration for Israel. Now, is God a God who restores people? Absolutely. But is ... Joel promising that for the contemporary reader today? No, I don't think it's an individual promise of restoration. I think it is giving a corporate promise for Israel. So, I think that's one of the ways that we do that. We pull out these Bible verses, give the promise without really understanding the context and the literary context.

Question 7:

What is the danger in reading prophetic texts ahistorically, or in isolation from their historic context?

Dr. Donna Petter

Reading prophetic texts void of their historical context is detrimental to a correct interpretation of the prophets. You would no more do that than you would try to understand me apart, really, from my family — my mom, my dad, my siblings. Of course you can understand me on my own, but whenever you put me in the context — my historical context of the family of origin that I come from — then I begin to make a lot more sense to you. And so, it is very similar with the biblical text. You extract the historical context, and then that text can mean *anything* to *anybody* at *any* time. But the problem with that is that these texts are not ahistorical. They have a target audience, and there is a target timeframe in which that audience is addressed. And it could be a prophet to the eighth century, or the seventh century, or the sixth, or the fifth. And in each of those centuries there is something that is going on historically that is critical, and typically it's the people of God who are interacting with another superpower. Whether it be the Assyrians and God's people interacting, whether it be the Babylonians and God's people interacting, there's always a historical context from which the interactions take place. And so, God's prophets are often addressing international political situations and then, also, the situation with Israel. And the two of them collide together. And so, it's imperative then that we as modern readers recall and remember that these prophets were not written in a vacuum, but they can hang their hat, as it were, on a very real historical landscape that helps us to really read accurately and understand what they're getting after. Isaiah interacts with Hezekiah — feet-on-the-ground king — and there's all these interactions. Isaiah interacts with Ahaz. These are kings who reigned in the nation, and one king trusts the Lord, one king doesn't, and so Isaiah brings the word of the Lord to both of these individuals. But that word of the Lord to these individuals also has ramifications for the entire nation. So, therefore, you have to read the Prophets very clearly in light of a strong historical context.

Dr. Mike Ross

When we study or preach or teach through the Prophets, it's important to grasp the original meaning of the prophet's message in the context of his own time and culture, even though he's often speaking about things in the distant future. And here's why: that immediate context is the springboard for his future prophecies, whether those prophecies look forward to Christ — the coming of Christ and the events around his life and the life of the apostles — or the church age and the end of time and the second coming of Christ. So, his immediate context gives us the understanding of at least three things. First of all, the spiritual issues he was dealing with, with his immediate people. Those issues come time and again. We're told by Paul in Corinthians that, "No temptation has overtaken [us] but such as is common to man." So, we continue to have these same issues of idolatry, of injustice, of carnal living and so forth. And so this prophet is giving us an excellent historical example of how

to pastorally and prophetically deal with these things. Secondly, his message becomes a “type” of the issues that Christ and the apostles and the church would be dealing with. So, we notice in the New Testament that Jesus and the apostles quote, more than anybody else in the Old Testament, these prophets and how they addressed issues and how they laid out certain spiritual priorities and in their vision of God and his relationship covenantally with his people. And then thirdly, there is always in the immediate message some foreshadowing of a future event. It could be the judgment of God upon the world or upon the church, maybe some corrective discipline he’s going to give, or some grand vision of renewal, and out of what happens in his own time, many of these prophets saw revivals. They saw restorative works of God. Some of them, unfortunately, saw painful things like invasions and exiles and dispersions. These things become the foreshadowings, the “types” of things that will happen to the New Testament church in our age, only on a grander, worldwide scale. So, it’s really important for the student, the pastor, the teacher to study the immediate context — the danger is to jump right into the application for today, without studying the context — so that we could go from the “then” to the “now” and put our message in the same spiritual context that was originally given by God through the Holy Spirit to these wonderful prophets of the Old Testament.

Question 8: **What is grammatico-historical exegesis?**

Dr. Russell T. Fuller

The term grammatico-historical exegesis has been understood that, when we read a passage of Scripture, that we should understand it according to its grammar, according to its syntax, and also according to the historical context, and therefore, we would say, how would the original hearers have understood that message in their time? And so, we want to be careful that, as we’re interpreting the Bible, we want to do it in accordance with its syntax, with its grammar, but also in accordance with its history. And therefore, if we interpret the Scriptures in a way where it’s, let’s say, out of history or “anachronistic,” then there’s great inaccuracy in the way we interpret Scripture. And so, the best way to interpret Scripture, of course, is to let one portion of Scripture interpret the other. And, if you’ll notice, that sometimes the apostles will interpret Scripture grammatically-historically. They’ll do it that way sometimes. If you read, for instance, in Galatians 3, Paul’s talking about how Abraham was saved, and he talks about the relationship between the promises given to Abraham and then the Law that’s given some 430 years later. You can see as Paul is writing Galatians 3 that he is understanding that in a very grammatical and an historical way. And so, the apostles use a historical-grammatical approach, so we should also do that. Now, certainly they use other types of methods of interpretation as well. They will interpret the Scriptures sort of theologically, but you can clearly see that almost all of their interpretations have a basis that is based in grammar and based in history, and therefore, that’s why we like the grammatico-historical approach.

Dr. David Correa, translation

When we speak of grammatico-historical exegesis, what we mean is that, above everything, the Bible is a book. It's a divine book, but it's also a human book. It's a book that was given in human language, in a certain time and particular context. So, interpreters would do well to pay attention to both the literary context and the historical context. As interpreters, we must pay attention to all those grammatical and literary aspects that come from the fact that the Bible is a book that was written in a certain language. We all know that the Bible was written in Hebrew, and it was written in Greek. So then, interpreters need to pay attention to all the good grammatical rules of those languages, to the meanings, to the semantics, to the syntax, for a proper and adequate interpretation. But it's also necessary to pay attention to the cultural context, when you can, in which the books of the Bible were written. The Old Testament books were written in a certain time in certain cultures, those of the New Testament as well. We cannot simply ignore those aspects if we want to find a correct interpretation. It's necessary that the interpreter pay attention, very strict attention, to the whole historical context and also to the literary context.

Mr. Sherif Atef Fahim, translation

By grammatico-historical exegesis we mean, first, that we have to know the language of the text. We mean many things by the language — the grammar, the words used and their meanings, the syntax of the sentences, and the genre of the text, whether poetry, prose, or narrative. We have to understand the genre of the text. Second, the historical context or the historical meaning of the text. This means that we have to understand when the text was written, what is before and after it, what the historical events that it points to are, what the historical events that occurred before and after it are. The grammatico-historical exegesis gives the real meaning of the text.

Dr. Guy Waters

Grammatico-historical exegesis is a way of summarizing, in short form, an answer to the question, how is meaning to be found in a text? We insist that there is meaning to be found, and we insist that meaning is going to be derived from the text itself. Well, how does that happen? Well, the word “exegesis” is simply a word meaning “to explain; to draw out,” and we're drawing out meaning from the text. It's not from the author independently of the text, it's not from the reader independently, or even in conjunction with, the text, but we say the text says something. How is that meaning to be drawn out? Well, “grammatico,” that captures grammar. We attend very carefully the words. What do those words mean, those words in relationship to one another at the very simplest level, word-to-word? We call those “syntactical relationships.” And then we expand, we look at clauses and sentences and paragraphs and much larger units of discourse. Historical means that a text is written at a particular place, at a particular point in time, by a particular author, and meaning has to be understood in the context, in that historical context that I've just outlined... We do insist that the Scripture has something to say to readers in all times and all ages, but it had to have meant something to the original audience. And its words, its meanings, its reference, of course, have to be understood in that historical context. And once we come to terms with the grammar and with the historical context, then we're in a position to say

this is what the text means, and then we can make application to contemporary audiences.

Question 9:

How can we draw practical modern applications from biblical prophecy without ignoring the prophet's original intention?

Dr. Mike Ross

It's important when we interpret biblical prophecy to take very seriously the prophet's original intention in what he said and what he wrote. It's a common problem, among preachers in particular, but Bible students as well, to read the prophecy and immediately jump to an application. I think sometimes we're afraid that if we spend too much time telling the congregation, or the Bible study, the historical context and what was behind this particular imagery, or this particular sin that he was addressing, or this particular social event or political incident, that they'll become bored. But his original intention, like any author, becomes the core of his message. Now, one biblical scholar has talked about the periphery vision of these prophets, and it's out of the side of their spiritual eyes that, in one way, they're looking back on Genesis, and especially the book of Deuteronomy. They see themselves, as William VanGemeren calls them, "covenant prosecutors." They're bringing a case as an attorney; representing God, they're suing the people of Israel for breaking the covenant. Out of the other eye, they're looking down on this side of history to a grand conclusion where that covenant comes to complete and full consummation. This is in their minds, and this is in their hearts and in their vision — spiritual vision. But they're addressing the context that they're in, so we have to start from there, whether it's by their using their message as a typology, or as prophecy, or as a general inference to something that's coming later on. And you see that in the New Testament prophets... They'll sometimes make applications to the prophets that would surprise us, but when you see it in the grand scope of their periphery vision, you could say, you know, that's a legitimate inference and a legitimate application of their original message. And when that happens, then you know that you have applied the prophet correctly. And of course, we see the prophets applied that way all the time in the New Testament. We have our first rule of hermeneutics that the Scripture interprets Scripture, and that's what these prophets are doing under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. They're drawing this inference or application from this original message so that both of these things, although they seem maybe radically different, are actually true.

Dr. Craig S. Keener

Many times biblical prophets were addressing particular issues, particular events, particular persons. However, if we understand the principles of the character of God seen in those prophecies, we can see how they apply today as well. For example, in Isaiah 14:12, you have the king of Babylon who has exalted himself, and then he's going to be cast down to Sheol. He's going to be cast down to the realm of the dead,

and all the kings that he conquered are going to rise up and mock him and say, “Look, now you have become weak just like we have. Now you’re being eaten by maggots just like our corpses were.” Well, how does that apply today? It’s a warning against pride. It’s a warning against exalting ourselves, usurping the role of God. It’s a warning against those who do that in society. Back then there were many divine kings, but you still have arrogant people who act like the whole world is about them. And again, it’s a warning to us to make sure that we humble ourselves before the living God.

Dr. Richard L. Pratt, Jr.

As Christians, we always have to remember that when we look back at any Old Testament revelation, we always have to view it in the light of the things that God has revealed in the new covenant, the things that Jesus and his apostles and first century prophets have given to us in the New Testament. This becomes our framework, our spectacles, as it were, by which look at all of the Old Testament. Whether we’re talking about prophecy, or the Law, or the Psalms, whatever it may be, we’re always having to do that. But when it comes to the Prophets, there are particular emphases that we can see in the prophetic word that we need, then, to look at through these spectacles of the New Testament... And one of the most obvious of these is the notion that there’s a moral code that we’re supposed to observe. When the prophets brought their messages, they frequently talked about the law of God and how Israel and Judah, the people of God, had violated the law of God and how, if they were going to serve God faithfully, they had to do so according the revelation of God that he had given in Moses and David and others, other prophets and the like, the law of God, the moral code. Now, as Christians, when we read the Prophets, we can learn a lot about morality for ourselves, how we’re to live in grateful loyalty to God because of what he has done in Christ. But of course, we do know that the New Testament gives us ways in which we must look back at those Old Testament moral codes and understand how they’re to be used today. It’s not that we throw them away. If we throw away the moral code of the Prophets, we’re throwing away the heart of the Prophets. And so, when we see that that prophets said, “Treat the poor in Israel well. Stop defrauding them of justice,” when we see that they say things like, “You shouldn’t have prostitution in your worship services,” when we see that they talk in terms of drunkenness as evil, and things like that, we can see that these are moral instructions that they were giving to the people of God in their day. And when we view those moral instructions in the light of the New Testament, we can see that we can find our own moral instructions from them. One of the reasons that the New Testament doesn’t give us a lot of rules, a lot of moral instruction, is because New Testament authors believed that you should look back at the Old Testament to find these moral instructions. And one of the places we can find those is in the Prophets.

But another unusual feature, or certainly *emphasis* that the prophets had in their messages, is the threat of God’s judgment against his people. And the fact is, is that many Christians think that the new covenant in Jesus tells us that there is no such threat of judgment — or *discipline* might be a better way to put it — against God’s people today. But you cannot read the first three chapters of the book of Revelation

and think that that's true, because the churches of Revelation were being threatened by Jesus himself with judgment, with discipline on their churches, sometimes very harsh discipline on their churches, much like the prophets of the Old Testament. The apostle Paul does the same thing in 1 Corinthians 10 when he says that Old Testament discipline of Israel is like New Testament discipline of the church. So, when we read these prophecies about God's judgment coming against his people, we must remember that, even in the Old Testament, these were God's discipline of his people, and it sort of, as it were, weeded out the true believers from the unbelievers. The true believers in ancient Israel would respond positively to God's discipline, just like true believers today respond positively to God's discipline, but the unbelievers in Israel would find themselves collapsing under the weight of those judgments, just like unbelievers in the church today will find themselves collapsing under the weight of the discipline of God.

But then the other sort of big message I think that you can find throughout prophecy in the Old Testament is this: it's that, yes, there is judgment for those who violate, who flagrantly violate the law of God, but there's also hope. There's hope that repentance will lead to life. And, in fact, there's even this great hope of a new day coming after Israel and Judah's exiles are over. Once the Messiah comes, this great hope of the latter days, that salvation will come, and it will come because Messiah has sacrificed himself for his people and that Messiah gives his Holy Spirit to his people, and he makes them new from the inside out. And that, of course, is the hope that we have as Christians, that no matter how hard things become in this world, even sometimes because of our failures that we suffer under God's judgment, our hope is not in this world. Our hope is in the world to come, in Jesus, who died for us, who resurrected for us, and who's coming back for us. That message of hope that the prophets had, we know how it unfolds. It unfolds in Jesus.

Question 10:

How did the Old Testament prophets understand the “day of the Lord”?

Dr. Imad Shehadeh, translation

The concept of the “day of the Lord,” particularly in the Old Testament, is that it is the day when the Lord will fulfill his purposes. In it, there will be a final judgment where God will be vindicated, and after the judgment there will be blessings. For instance, we read in Isaiah 13:9:

Behold, the day of the Lord comes, cruel, with wrath and fierce anger, to make the land a desolation and to destroy its sinners from it (Isaiah 13:9).

Joel says: “Alas for the day!” He means the day when the people of the earth will feel great regret because the Lord was very patient with them for centuries, and the day

has come for God to reveal his righteousness. But, the day of the Lord also includes a time of blessing when God will fulfill his purposes of goodness and blessings for the people of the earth. And some terms, like “the new heavens and the new earth,” are also part of the day of the Lord. So, there will be judgment for unbelievers, for evil, and for the enemies of people, and also blessings for the believers when God fulfills his promises to them. The theme of the “day of the Lord,” is also present in the New Testament. For instance, in 2 Peter 3:10, it says:

But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, and then the heavens will pass away with a roar, and the heavenly bodies will be burned up and dissolved, and the earth and the works that are done on it will be exposed (2 Peter 3:10).

We see in Revelation, John says, “I was in the Spirit on the Lord’s day.” Some might think that “the Lord’s day” is Sunday, but, in context, it’s clear that here “the Lord’s day” carries the same ideas as in 2 Peter because John is about to explain the difficult days that are coming. In this sense, the day of the Lord is a vision of what is going to happen in the future. This is why Paul says: “We rejoice in hope of the glory of God.” One day God will reveal his purposes, and his nature, his character, his righteousness and perfect attributes. And this will be the day of the Lord.

Dr. Russell T. Fuller

The prophets talk about this coming “day of the Lord,” and what they meant by it was that there was coming a time when God was going to act in such a way, it was so remarkable, it was supernatural, it was miraculous, it wasn’t just normal, let’s say, historical events, but God was going to intervene in history of Israel in such a way that it was called the “day of the Lord.” Now, sometimes it would be a miraculous deliverance that would be described as a day of the Lord, and other times it would be some type of judgment that would come that, again, would be the day of the Lord. So, it was some type of remarkable divine intervention in human affairs; this is what they would refer to as the day of the Lord. But all of these things, all of these days of the Lord that would happen, was really pointing to the *ultimate* day of the Lord, and that was the messianic age. That was the ultimate day of the Lord to the Old Testament prophets. So, even though, like for instance, the destruction of Jerusalem in 586, that was regarded as a day of the Lord, but that was just a type of, again, what was going to happen in the messianic age, and especially the second coming of the Lord. And so, again, the day of the Lord is when God does a special act in human history on behalf of his people, or perhaps even in judgment.

Pastor Doug McConnell

There are several elements to the day of the Lord. First of all, and probably foremost, it would be the day that God would humble mankind and vindicate his own name. We see in Isaiah 2 it talks about how every lofty thing will be brought down, and the Lord alone will be exalted in that day. It says something of God’s patience, doesn’t it, that he has waited this long to bring that kind of a judgment upon the world. So there’s that. There’s also the fact that God will vindicate his people. Those who have

oppressed his people will be brought down. His people will be exalted in the end. Often it talks in relationship to Israel being exalted and her enemies being destroyed. And it's also a day, ultimately, of redemption because it talks about, after this day, that the nations will call upon the Lord. It says in Zephaniah that after he pours out his indignation, then he will give the peoples, the nations, purified lips that they may worship him. Now, that's also found in the New Testament in the book of Revelation where, as they're ready to pour out the bowls of judgment upon the nations, those who are in heaven rejoice because, as a result, the nations will come and worship. And that's an aspect that's not often seen by commentators, that there is going to be, even after this judgment, the Spirit poured out upon people and, as a result, people will be saved. So, it's both a day of judgment, a day of vindication, a day where God alone will be seen to be who he is, and the world will know that the Lord is God. And it's a day that's supposed to be one looked forward to by God's people as the vindication most of all, not of *us*, but of his name and his glory.

Dr. Chip McDaniel

The “day of the Lord” in the Old Testament is sometimes confusing for us as believers, because when we think of the day of the Lord we think of that final day of the Lord as described in 1 and 2 Thessalonians — either the coming of Christ or the two events that are yet in the future. When we come to the Old Testament, however, the day of the Lord is much more along the lines of events that are taking place where God is breaking into the history of the time, and he's shaking things up in a major way. And so, for example, for the southern kingdom, when Joel describes the locust plagues in Joel 1, he says, “This is the day of the Lord. The Lord is punishing us because of our sin, and if we follow the Lord, if we repent of our sins, he'll take this away.” So that major event of this economic collapse would be the day of the Lord for them. We also have in Jeremiah 46 the citation that Egypt is going to be defeated at the battle of Carchemish. That occurred in 605, and that's also the day of the Lord because the Lord is punishing Egypt. He's going to allow the Babylonians to come to the forefront of the region, and so that's the day of the Lord against them. In Isaiah 13 we have, the day of the Lord is the destruction of Babylon in which God is going to punish them for what they've done. It also anticipates that he's going to bring Judah and Israel back from the captivity. That's the day of the Lord as well. The day of the Lord is when God judges Israel and Judah. So, in Amos 5 or in Zephaniah 1, it's a very dark time, a very depressing time; that's the day of the Lord as he comes to judge his people. We also have, finally, in Zechariah 14, we have the day of the Lord, and that's when God — apparently in an event that is probably yet future if we're understanding the New Testament correctly — where God judges all the nations. And so, when we see “day of the Lord” in the Old Testament, we have to be careful to discern because usually it refers to things that have already been accomplished during that time, where God intervenes and breaks into the affairs of men in a major way. But there are times when it probably also refers to things that are yet future with respect to us.

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