

# Interpreting a Biblical Passage

## Genre – Prophecy

The OT prophets are **preachers** who proclaim God's word and function as **covenant police officers**. Contrary to popular opinion, the Prophets say very little about the future. Mostly, they hold Israel to account for breach of covenant law. Prophecy is a complex *mixture* of genres (poetry, narrative, law, proclamation), complicated further by its use of obscure and symbolic language, historical particularity (discussing *specific* events from our past and Israel's **immediate** future), biblical cross-referencing, and its often non-sequential arrangement of individual "sermons."

### Prophetic Policing Functions



Stop – crying out to the nations to stop sinning



Yield – calling the nation back to covenant faithfulness, trusting God and obeying the Law



Warning – warning the nation of coming judgment if they refuse to repent of covenant unfaithfulness

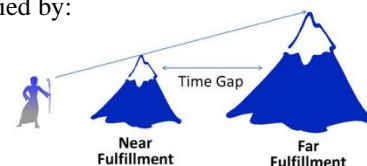


Up-Ahead – anticipating future blessings and God's coming kingdom. **\*Sometimes called "telescoping," from the prophet's perspective, predictions are sometimes fulfilled partially in Israel's immediate future with still fuller fulfilment in the NT period and even further fulfilment into the end of the ages.**

### Common Forms of OT Prophecy

#### Prophetic Telescoping

- **Disaster** – announces imminent or future disaster to individuals or nations, identified by:
  - a messenger formula ("the Lord says")
  - statement of offence ("you consult the god of Ekron"), and
  - the prediction of disaster ("you will surely die")  
(e.g., 2 Kings 1.3-4; Isa 30.15-17; Jer 28.12-14, 15-16; Mic 1.2-7)
  - Other forms of Disaster include:
    - **Woe** – "Woe to those/you who" – identified by a declaration of "woe," statement of offence ("they defraud a man"), messenger formula ("the Lord says"), and prediction of disaster (e.g., Mic 2.1-5).
    - **Dirge** – a funeral lament, addressing Israel as a *corpse*, identified by a call to hear ("Hear this word"), the dirge ("fallen is Israel"), messenger formula ("the Lord says"), prediction of disaster (e.g., Isa 14.3-21; Ezek 19.1-14; 26.17-18; 27.32; Amos 5.1-3).
- **Salvation** – positive counterpart to disaster, structured like a **Disaster** but with a **positive** prediction (e.g., Isa 2.1-5; Amos 9.11-15; Jer 28.2-4).
- **Lawsuit** – Israel on trial for breach of covenant; identified by:
  - Call to hear ("Listen to what the Lord says")
  - Summons ("Plead your case before the mountains")
  - Reason ("the Lord has a case against his people")
  - God's question ("My people, what have I done to you?")
  - Testimony ("I brought you out of Egypt...")  
(e.g., Isa 1.2-3; 3.3-15; Jer 2.4-13; Hos 4.1-3; Micah 6.1-5; Psalm 50)
- **Vision reports** – autobiographical accounts of a vision, identified by the words "see," "made to see," "behold." (E.g., Amos 1.1; 7.12; Mic 3.6-7), including question-answer with God (Amos 7.7-8), heavenly scenes anticipating earthly activity (Amos 7.1-6), or "mystery" revelations, angelic dialogue to unveil God's hidden plans (Zech 2.1-4).
- **Narrative** – two forms: 1) call to prophetic vocation, authenticating the prophet and his message (Isa 6; Jer 1; Ezek 1-3); and 2) call to symbolic action, odd behaviours symbolizing God's future activity (Jer 19; 2 Kings 13.14-19).



### Reading and Applying Prophecy

- Read a prophecy according to its language, genre, and form (i.e., read poetry *poetically* and symbol *symbolically*; don't force *figurative* language to be *literal*)
- Identify the covenant stipulations in question: are those laws still valid for Christians to apply in "love" (Gal 5.14)?
- Understand what the prophecy says to its *particular historical circumstance* (**where** and **when** was the prophecy?)
  - Does the prophecy reveal God's heart for how *His people* (OT or NT) ought to behave?
  - Are there principles of *repentance, hope*, or revelation on *God's character* that apply today?
  - Have the *predictive* elements of a prophecy been fulfilled *already* in Israel's past or in the NT?
  - Are still *future* fulfilments of prophecy meant *literally* or *figuratively*?