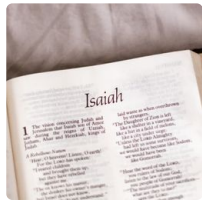


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Isaiah - Introduction to the Prophets (Part 1)



Isaiah - Steve Gregg

The Old Testament prophets are a fascinating and important part of the Bible, and in this discussion, Steve Gregg provides an introductory overview of the prophetic literature. The prophetic books are a subset of the Old Testament, with the notable exception of Jonah which simply tells a story. The prophets were individuals who received supernatural revelations from God, and their words were considered the word of God. It is essential to interpret the prophetic literature correctly, and to discern between true and false prophets.

Transcript

As we begin our study in the Old Testament prophets, I think it's necessary for us to take one introductory lecture to the whole genre of the prophetic literature in the Old Testament. The prophetic literature in the Old Testament is the most difficult part of the Bible for modern people to understand. In fact, I wouldn't be surprised if it was hard for the original readers to understand because of the variety of literary devices employed, because of the ambiguity of some statements, the obscurity of many of the things that are said, and even the obscurity later of their fulfillments when they were fulfilled.

Modern readers, when they read the prophets, find themselves scratching their heads, I think, far more than when they read the narrative history of the Old Testament or the New. Now, there's certainly mysteries to be solved in every part of the Bible, and I don't suppose there's any region of Scripture that's safe from causing questions and even confusion. But I think the prophets are the most likely to engender curiosity, unanswered questions, confusion, just perplexity.

And I think they are, therefore, the least familiar parts of the Scripture to most Christians. Now, Isaiah and Jeremiah and Ezekiel and Daniel, perhaps, are the most well-known prophets to Christians, partly because they are quoted and alluded to so often in the New Testament. The minor prophets are perhaps even more obscure to Christians than the major prophets, but the whole group of prophetic books would stand as a class of probably the most challenging portion of Scripture.

And those are what we're going to be seeking to explore and hopefully to understand as well as God may allow as we study them. The prophets in the Bible are a second section in the Jewish Tanakh, the Jewish canon of the Old Testament. Of course, the Torah, the law, the first five books of Moses are their first section, the first division of the Jewish Bible.

The prophets are the second division. They have the former prophets and the later prophets. What the Jews call the former prophets are actually what we call the historical books for the most part.

Samuel, Kings, Joshua and Judges, they are, we call them historical books. The Jews call them the former prophets because those books, though historic in their content, are thought to have been written by men who were prophets. And that's why they're in the Bible.

Not all the histories that have been written in ancient times have entered into our Bibles, but the historical books of our Bible are there because the Jews believe that they were written by prophets. And therefore, they call those books the former prophets. Now, what we call the prophets, and we're talking about the major prophets and the 12 minor prophets, they call the latter prophets or later prophets.

And so that's the section we're going to be looking at. Now, the later prophets are books actually of prophecy themselves. They're written by prophets, and their content is prophecy for the most part.

Jonah is a rather notable exception, which simply tells a story. But Jonah was also a prophet known to have lived in the reign of Jeroboam II, mentioned in the book of 2 Kings. But the first five prophetic books in the collection of the later prophets are Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Daniel, and of course the book of Lamentations is thrown in there for us.

That's because it is believed that Lamentations was also written by the prophet Jeremiah, and it's positioned in our Bible as if it's something of an appendix to the book of Jeremiah. Then there are 12 minor prophets. We will not be covering those in this particular school simply because we won't have time, and we'll be very fortunate to get through the major prophets.

But before we look at any of the prophets, there are some basic foundational things that would help us to get under our belts so that we're not entirely in unfamiliar territory. First of all, we could ask, what is a prophet? In the New Testament, there are prophets, but of course they don't appear for the first time in the New Testament. They appear for the first time in the Old Testament.

In the New Testament, we have men like Agabus, who are referred to as prophets, or

Philip's four daughters. Philip the Evangelist had four daughters who prophesied. So men and women were prophets in the Bible, both in the Old and the New Testament.

In fact, Paul said in 1 Corinthians 11 that women in the church could pray or prophesy if their heads were properly covered. And so women were known to prophesy as well as men. In the Old Testament, there are female prophets as well as male prophets.

But the vast majority are men. The writing prophets, as we call them, were men. Not all of the prophets were writing prophets.

For example, some of the greatest prophets, Elijah and Elisha, as far as we know, never wrote any books. Elijah wrote a letter to a king, but we don't have any books written by either Elijah or Elisha, although Elijah is considered to be the prince of the prophets in the Jewish estimation. So there were great prophets who never wrote books, or if they did, their books did not survive.

We are left to decipher the writings of a few prophets who we call the writing prophets. In Numbers 12, Moses, who was the man that God had chosen to lead Israel out of Israel and to the Promised Land initially, was the greatest of the prophetic leaders of Israel, the first and greatest. His sister Miriam and brother Aaron were also important people.

Miriam had prophesied. Aaron was the high priest. And they began to think that maybe Moses was getting too much exclusive attention as the leader because they were important too.

And they were also unhappy with Moses because of his choice of mates. He had married an Ethiopian woman, and this offended them. I don't know if it's because she was a Gentile or because she was dark-skinned or whatever the reason was.

Moses' brother and sister objected to his choice of an Ethiopian woman, so they criticized him. In verse 2 of Numbers 12, they said, Has the Lord indeed spoken only through Moses? Has he not spoken through us also? In other words, why should we have Moses be our exclusive leader here? God has spoken through other people besides him, us for example. And God of course struck Miriam with leprosy for this rebellious talk.

Aaron was not struck with leprosy. We can't say for sure why. Very possibly because as the high priest, he would not be able to function at all in the priesthood if he had leprosy.

He'd be unclean. Miriam was dispensable more because she didn't serve any particular function in the government or the religious system. But he made an example of her.

Moses, of course, interceded for her, and her leprosy was healed. But in the course of God rebuking Aaron and Miriam, in verse 6, God said, Hear now my words. If there is a prophet among you, I, the Lord, make myself known to him in a vision, and I speak to him in a dream.

Now he goes on to say Moses is not like ordinary prophets. God speaks much more intimately face to face with Moses, and therefore even if Miriam or Aaron thought themselves to be prophets, they are not equal to Moses, and they should not think themselves so. But the point here is that God more or less defines what a prophet is.

A prophet, he says, if I raise up a prophet, I speak to him in a vision or a dream. Now that's not the only way God speaks, but most of the prophets received dreams and visions. And these were, as we would say, revelations from God, supernatural revelations.

And because they are supernatural and from God, there's really no limit to how much information and knowledge could be put into these revelations, because God knows everything, and that means God can tell the future. And many times the prophetic visions and dreams foretell future events, but not always. Many times the prophetic oracles are not predictive at all, but they are simply God's word to the people.

And in this we have to understand what we mean by God's word. I'm an evangelical. I was raised in an evangelical church.

I believe in the Bible as the word of God. Not all people do, not even all people who call themselves Christians do, but I do. I believe the Bible is the word of God, but I think we need to be careful.

Not to think that the printed page is the primary meaning of the expression, the word of God. In fact, I once was challenged by a caller on the radio. He said, why do you call the Bible the word of God when the Bible says that Jesus is the word of God? And I said, well, you know, the Bible is the inscripturated word.

Jesus is the incarnate word. A good standard answer. But afterwards I was curious.

I thought, well, next time I'll have some scripture on hand for a question like that. So I went and I searched all the references in the Bible to the expression, the word of God. None of them referred to the Bible.

None of them referred to written documents. The word of the Lord came to Isaiah or Jeremiah or Elijah or Agabus or somebody. And Paul and the apostles, when they went to certain towns, they preached the word of the Lord.

They preached the word of God, which means the gospel. They weren't preaching from, I mean, they quoted scripture in their sermons. Scripture was a part of what they contained.

But their whole message was the word of God. Paul said to the Thessalonians when he wrote to them, when we preach to you, you receive what we said, not as the words of men, but as it was indeed the words of God. In other words, Paul's preaching was, as he

said, the word of God.

Of course, there was scriptural content. Paul, we know, and the other apostles and Jesus himself would include scriptural references when they were preaching in order to back up what they were saying. But the whole speaking of the prophetic men, a prophet, an apostle speaking, was giving the word of God.

Sometimes they wrote it down. Sometimes they did not. But the word of God is not a term in scripture that is used essentially to speak of the Bible.

When we say the Bible is the word of God, what we mean is that God's word came to certain men and women. But in this case, men took what God told them and wrote it down. But not everybody that God spoke to wrote down what he said.

And the men who did write didn't write down everything they heard. John, when he was on the island of Pappas, heard seven thunders. He was about to write that down.

He was told not to write that down. That's not to be written down. So only he knew what it said.

It was the word of God, but it never was written. So what is the word of God then? The word of God is that by which the whole world and universe were created. It says in Psalm 33, 6, by the word of the Lord, the heavens were made, and the host of them by the breath of his mouth.

He spoke, and it was so. He commanded, and it stood fast. It says three verses later, Psalm 33, verses 6 and 9. So God speaks.

God's speaking is his word, just like you're hearing my words right now because I'm speaking. If God speaks, what he speaks is his word. And does he speak only through pages of scripture? No, although that's one of the most reliable places for us to find God's word and know that it really is his word.

See, one of the problems is if God does speak, not everyone will recognize it. In fact, a voice spoke from heaven to Jesus in John 12, and some said it thundered. Not everyone recognized it even as the word of God.

On the other hand, sometimes we get impressions we call them the word of God. We think it's God speaking, and sometimes it isn't. I've had many people tell me things that God told them, which when I heard it, I knew that God didn't tell them, simply because what it was was not true or not scriptural or something like that.

In other words, God speaks other than in scripture, but only in scripture do we know for sure immediately when we see it. This is the word of God. We know that God spoke reliably to Moses, to Elijah, to Elisha, to Isaiah, Jeremiah, these men, through Jesus,

through the apostles.

When we read what they have written, we know that what we are reading is the word of God written down. But before it was written down, it was the word of God already, God speaking to them. When Jesus was in the wilderness being tempted by the devil, he said, Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds out of the mouth of God.

Now, of course, Jesus quoted scripture to Satan on that occasion, and even the verse he quoted from Deuteronomy 8, where God was no doubt referring to his written laws as the words. However, he didn't say every word that God has written down, but every word that proceeds out of the mouth of God. When we speak of the word of God, we're talking about that which God is communicating by his spirit.

It says in 2 Peter 1 that this is how the scriptures came to be. In 2 Peter 1, verse 19, well, let's just move down to verse 20. 2 Peter 1.20, Peter said, Knowing this first, that no prophecy of scripture is of any private interpretation.

Now, this statement has been misunderstood. I think the Roman Catholics were the first to give it the wrong meaning, and Protestants have hardly ever gotten away from the wrong meaning that the Catholics gave it. No prophecy of scripture is of any private interpretation.

The Roman Catholic interpretation of that verse is that no one should make up their own understanding of scripture. They have to get it from the bishops and from the popes, because ordinary people aren't smart enough or spiritual enough to interpret scripture properly, and therefore you're in danger if you start thinking for yourself when you read the Bible. Now, Protestants broke away from that, saying, well, Luther can think for himself, but once Luther started, he's the last guy who was allowed to think for himself.

But then came the Anabaptists, and their leaders were allowed to think for themselves, but no one after that. And then came Wesley and the others, and all the denominations. They acknowledged that their leader, who broke away from the previous movement he was part of, it was okay for him to think for himself, but once you're in the movement, don't think for yourself anymore.

And so almost every Protestant group still quotes this verse, no scripture is of any private interpretation. You dare not interpret the scripture for yourself. They're misunderstanding the entire verse.

They should interpret correctly. Peter goes on to explain what he means. He does not say that no scripture is for or to be subjected to private interpretation.

He says no scripture is of. That means from. The word of means from.

No scripture originates from any man's private interpretation. He's talking about the prophets who wrote. They were not giving you their ideas.

They were not giving their own interpretation of the facts around them, and where they thought the trajectory was going to lead things to go. They weren't giving their opinions. The scripture didn't arise from people's private interpretations.

He says, but the prophecy never came by the will of man. But holy men of God spoke as they were moved by the Holy Spirit. So Peter's telling us where scripture came from.

He's not telling you what you should or should not do with the scripture. He's not forbidding that people interpret scripture. How could you interpret every word you hear a person speak, every sentence you read in a magazine or in a book or in the Bible? You have to interpret it.

It's just black marks on a page. You have to assign meaning to it. That's interpretation.

We will be interpreting scripture, but there's no need for you to believe my interpretation, unless it's right. You have to check for yourself. Of course you're responsible to personally interpret and understand scripture.

That's why the Bereans, when they heard Paul speak, didn't simply accept what he said, but they searched the scriptures daily to see if the things he was saying were so. It says, therefore, many of them believe. Well, that means that they were checking him out, and according to the best of their ability to understand scripture, to see if it was what it meant.

They were interpreting, and they should. They were more noble than the Thessalonians, it says in Acts 17. In any case, the Bereans checked it out for themselves.

You are supposed to judge. You are supposed to judge everything you hear. If somebody says, well, this is what the Bible means, you have every right to say, well, I don't know if that means that or not.

I hear you saying it. Now I'll check you out and see if I think you're right. But Peter is saying that holy men of God spoke as the Holy Spirit moved them to speak.

Now notice Peter doesn't say they wrote as the Holy Spirit moved them. It's interesting. Peter talks about how the word of God came to the prophets, and they spoke.

Now much of what they spoke, though not all, was written down. We're very fortunate to have a great volume of their writings written down, but they no doubt spoke many things besides. Isaiah, for example, had a ministry probably of about 50 years in duration.

We have 66 chapters of his writings. I can hardly believe that's all he ever spoke in 50 years. You can read through it in a day.

So he must have preached either the same things many times or many other things that are not recorded, but we have sufficient. Peter said that we have all things necessary for life and godliness given to us through the word of God. And so God apparently preserved for us of the prophetic writings what we needed to know.

But when we're reading the writings of a prophet, we're reading the writings of a person who received special revelation from God. In Numbers 12.6, he suggests dreams and visions, a very common means by which prophets heard from God. Sometimes it just says the word of the Lord came, and they gave what we call an oracle.

When a prophet gives an oracle, it's like he comes under the influence of the Holy Spirit in some way. It's never explained to us exactly in what way that was or what the actual subjective experience of a prophet was when he was receiving the word of God, and I suspect it wasn't the same for everybody. But it would appear that sometimes prophets would go into a trance.

Other times, apparently they didn't go into a trance, and they just had the burden of the Lord on their heart, and God enabled them to speak it out as he wanted it to be presented. Or they saw a dream and a vision, and then they reported it. Now, see, this is why I make a difference between them speaking and writing.

Daniel, for example, says, I was over by the river, and I saw this, and this man said that, and I heard that, and I wrote it down later. Now, we have to assume that since that was a revelation from God, what he received was the word of God. He wrote it down on his own time.

We don't know that he came under special influence at the time he dipped his quill in the ink and started writing. We suppose that he had adequate memory of what God had said and what he had seen. He says, I had a dream, and I saw these beasts coming out of the sea.

I don't think he was writing in his sleep. I think that when he woke up, he remembered the dream distinctly and was able to write it down. Now, what I'm saying is there was not any magic, as near as I know, going on, and perhaps magic is too coarse a word, but I don't know that anything supernatural was going on at the moment he was putting the pen to the paper.

We sometimes think of the Bible as something written almost by automatic writing, like an occultic kind of phenomenon where someone just kind of, they're just like a dictaphone for the spirits or something like that, or for the Holy Spirit in this case. There's not evidence of this in the Bible. The prophets each has his own personality, his own vocabulary, his own favorite expressions that he uses.

Isaiah is different than Jeremiah. His personality is different. His favorite expressions are

different.

Ezekiel is much different, much more repetitious than any of the other prophets. You see, each prophet received a revelation from God, whether it's by dream or vision or by an oracular anointing or something, and spoke forth the words of God, but they spoke in their own language. They spoke in their own idiom.

They spoke from their own personalities. Their personality was not canceled out. It's not just that every word we have is just the word directly from the Holy Spirit and as if the sentences were framed by the Holy Spirit himself.

If so, his personality would be the same in all the prophets. Same Holy Spirit. If we have only the Holy Spirit's personality involved, then it would be a consistent personality throughout all the writings of the prophets, presumably similar vocabulary and so forth.

But we have the personalities of the men very much involved. What they wrote was what God revealed to them. But their literary style, for example, may have been to a very large extent from their own literary abilities.

For example, Isaiah is considered to be one of the most literary men who wrote anything in the Scriptures, considered to be one of the greatest poets who has written any kind of literature at all. Almost all the prophets wrote in poetry. Some of them were better poets than others.

But what they wrote was what God showed them, what God revealed to them. So what they wrote is in their own words in many cases, it would appear. But the thoughts that they gave are those which were revealed supernaturally to them and therefore contain God's message to the people to whom they spoke and they wrote.

What is the purpose of prophets? Why did God give prophets to his people? Well, according to 1 Corinthians 14, 3, a prophet speaks to the edification and exhortation and comfort of God's people. Now Paul here is referring to the New Testament gift of prophecy. He is talking about the use of prophecy in the church.

And I should clarify that many people feel that an Old Testament prophet was different significantly than New Testament prophets. Many people believe that the Old Testament prophets, and you will hear this often stated by teachers, many teachers say that Old Testament prophets primarily were involved in foretelling the future. Whereas the New Testament prophets were primarily involved in foretelling.

Now foretelling and forth telling I think are words that are chosen because they sound similar to each other. But the second category is simply proclaiming God's message. In other words, almost all books about prophecy that I've read say the Old Testament prophets were predictive in their activity, where the New Testament prophets were more like preachers, preaching sermons, not so much predicting things.

I suppose that those who say that are trying to explain why it is they have no prophets in their churches. And that may be because they don't have the Holy Spirit moving in their churches, I don't know, or because they quench the Spirit, I'm not sure. I have to say I don't see as much genuine prophecy in any church as I think Paul talked about and seen in the churches.

He wanted to limit the prophets speaking to only two or three in a service. I don't know if I've heard two or three genuine prophets in a decade. I think I have heard a few, but there's an awful lot of prophets that do not impress me with their genuineness, but only with their ambition.

But in any case, this distinction works if you've got a church with no prophets. You can say, well, in the New Testament, prophecy isn't predictive. Prophecy in the New Testament is just preaching, just forth telling the message of God.

Well, that's neat and tidy, but it's just not biblical. If you read the Old Testament prophets, as we shall be doing, you'll find that a relatively small portion of what they wrote is predictive. What is most of it? It's preaching.

The Old Testament prophets spent far more time rebuking, warning, calling to repentance, preaching, and they punctuated their writings with predictions. So it would certainly be a misnomer to say that Old Testament prophecy is primarily made up of prediction. Not so.

It's there, but it's not the primary content. Now, what about New Testament prophets? We don't have many examples of their teaching, but we have one. In the Book of Acts, there's one man who's called a prophet, whose prophesying is recorded for us a couple of times, Agabus.

First time, he predicted there was going to be a famine. Second time, he predicted that Paul would be bound by the Jews when he came to Jerusalem. Predictive.

New Testament prophet, predictive. In fact, we don't know of him preaching at all. So if we want to suggest, as teachers almost always do, that there's a difference between Old Testament prophets and New Testament prophets in that one of them is predictive and the other is forth telling, then it's just the reverse of what is commonly said.

The Old Testament prophets were primarily preachers who sometimes predicted things. The New Testament prophets, we don't know what they did, except the two cases we know were predicting. Agabus predicted things.

We don't know if he ever preached a sermon. So my thought is that all prophets just speak whatever God has to say under inspiration, and they differ from teachers in that respect. A teacher is not a prophet.

Although I suppose a prophet might do some teaching sometimes, but the truth claims of a teacher's words are different than the truth claims of a prophet's words. For example, the Bible is entirely intolerant of false prophets, people who speak in the name of the Lord and it doesn't come true. They're supposed to be stoned to death.

A teacher who teaches a doctrine that isn't quite right, though he thinks it is, let's say he's got a wrong view about the rapture or a wrong view of predestination, he doesn't have to be taken out and stoned to death. He's not making the same kind of truth claim about his words as a prophet is. The prophet by nature is claiming that he's got a direct revelation from God and he's giving it to you with complete accuracy.

A teacher, his truth claim is, I'm reading the Bible and I'm trying to figure it out just like you are, and this is what I think it means. The prophet really was someone whose words were the words of God more directly. And I don't really know that in the New Testament, the prophetic ministry was much different than the prophetic ministry in the old, except that the New Testament ministry was more focused on the teachings of the apostles than on the prophetic.

There are prophets in the New Testament, but Paul says God gave, first of all, apostles, secondarily prophets. In the Old Testament, all the books of the Old Testament were considered to be prophetic. They were written by prophetic men.

Not all of them are books of prophecy, but they are thought to be written by prophetic men, prophets. The New Testament, none of the books were written by prophets, except Revelation, but the man who wrote that was probably an apostle also. The books of the New Testament were written by apostles, not prophets.

Though there were prophets in New Testament times, they didn't write any books for us. The apostles did. The word of the Lord came to us through the apostles primarily since the time of Christ, the appointed men.

Now, the apostles did not claim to be prophets. They didn't claim, thus saith the Lord. The prophets in the Old Testament spoke, thus saith the Lord, and they spoke as if they were God.

They spoke in the first person as God, speaking. The apostles didn't do that. The apostles talked just like you and I do, about God.

They talked about God in the third person, not the first person. It's a little different kind of a way of God giving his word, but there were prophets in the New Testament. They just didn't seem to be as prominent as the apostles were.

Some people say there should be no gift of prophecy after the time of the apostles because if there is a genuine gift of prophecy today, who knows, people might be adding more books to the Bible. Why? No one with the gift of prophecy wrote any books in the

Bible in the New Testament times. Why would they now? The gift of prophecy in the New Testament and in the Old, for the most part, was directed to the community that the prophet lived among.

In the case of Agabus, for example, in the New Testament, he spoke very timely things about a famine that was going to be happening and that the church he was talking to had to take up a collection and send some aid to the church in Jerusalem or that Paul was going to be bound. I mean, these are personal prophecies. He doesn't have to write a book for the whole church.

His prophecies are for individuals and for local churches, whereas the apostles wrote for the whole church at large, and that's why their books are in the Bible. Though there were many, probably many prophets in the New Testament times, since Paul says let the prophets speak two or three in one congregation in Corinth, there must have been hundreds, maybe thousands of prophets. None of their writings, if they wrote at all, were ever put in our Bible in the New Testament.

But the Old Testament was written by prophets, and the books we're reading were prophetic books written by prophets. The proof of a prophet was that he could predict the future. Now, that doesn't mean the main thing the prophets did was predict the future.

It was the proof that a man was a prophet. In Deuteronomy 18, Moses is saying that he's going to be gone, but that God would send other spokesmen to replace him, and particularly one prophet par excellence would be sent by God, and if the people would not listen to him, they'd be cut off. But he raises the question, well, how do you know if it's a real prophet or not? And in Deuteronomy 18, 21 and 22, he said, and if you say in your heart, how shall we know the word which the Lord has not spoken? Well, he answers, when a prophet speaks in the name of the Lord, if the thing does not happen or come to pass, that is the thing which the Lord has not spoken.

The prophet has spoken presumptuously. You shall not be afraid of him. When we study the book of Jeremiah, you'll see that Jeremiah sometimes refers to the false prophets, or God does through Jeremiah.

He says, these prophets, they spoke in my name, but I didn't send them. I didn't speak through them. I don't have anything to say.

They're speaking presumptuously. Moses said some will do that, and you can tell who they are when they predict something and it doesn't happen. In other words, if a genuine prophet predicts something, it'll happen because God knows what's going to happen.

But people don't, and therefore someone who's faking it is not likely to be getting it right. Some people may hit it right by sheer accident. But consistently, no.

A prophet has to be 100% right. If he's not, then there's no reason to believe he's a prophet of God. In Deuteronomy 13, there's another warning about false prophets of another sort.

In Deuteronomy 13, verses 1 through 3, Moses said, if there arises among you a prophet or a dreamer of dreams, and he gives you a sign or a wonder, and the sign or the wonder comes to pass, of which he spoke to you, saying, let us go after other gods which you have not known, and let us serve them, you shall not listen to the words of that prophet or that dreamer of dreams, for the Lord your God is testing you to know whether you love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul. Now notice, here's a case where a prophet gives a sign or a wonder, and it does come to pass. Now we saw in chapter 18, if it doesn't come to pass, he fails.

He fails the test. But this prophet, what he says actually happens. He gets it right.

He predicts something, and it really comes to pass. But there's another problem. His prophecy is drawing you away from Yahweh, from God.

He's leading you to follow other gods. Well, then don't believe that prophet either. So you can tell a prophet a couple of ways.

One would be, of course, if his predictions come true consistently, but also even if they do, his theology has to be sufficiently accurate, that he's not leading you away from God. If you find that somebody is teaching you things contrary to the real God and causing you to think wrongly about God or go after some other deity than that one revealed in Scripture, well, then that's a false prophet. So we are to test the prophets.

In 1 John 4, John assumes that the church is hearing from prophets on a regular basis, that is, contemporary living prophets in their churches. In the New Testament, sometimes the word spirit is used to mean a prophetic utterance. For example, the expression the discerning of spirits means the testing of prophecies.

And Paul in 2 Thessalonians says, don't be dissuaded by any letter that purports to be from us or any word or any spirit that says, he means any prophetic utterance that says that the day of the Lord has come. Here in 1 John 4, John says, Beloved, do not believe every spirit. He means every prophetic utterance that is given.

But test the spirits, whether they are of God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world. And he goes on to talk about if they don't profess that Jesus has come in the flesh, a particular doctrinal controversy in his time. We might say if they teach anything false about Jesus, they are false prophets.

But he assumes there will be prophetic utterances which are not genuine because he says many false prophets are out there, apparently in the church as well. And so he says when you hear these spirits, when you hear these utterances, don't just accept them

because they claim to be from God. There is a great gullibility in many cases among that sector of the church that listens to prophecy.

That sector is usually called the charismatic sector. I actually belong to that sector. I believe in the gift of prophecy.

If you believe that the charismatic gifts are for today, technically you're charismatic because the word charismatic comes from the word charisma, the gifts. And if you believe that the gifts of the spirit are for today and that they did not end in the time of the apostles, then technically you're a charismatic. If you don't believe that, you're a cessationist.

You believe the gifts ceased in the first century. On those terms, by those definitions, I'm a charismatic. However, I find that in charismatic circles, many times there's such a desire to hear prophetic words that almost all prophetic words are accepted as genuine.

And people can say all kinds of weird things, and they don't get tested at all. But you see, if you test a prophet, and especially if you stop him and say, I don't think that's of God, I think that's false. Some people say, well, don't touch God's anointed.

Well, I won't, but you're not him. You've just proven it by your false prophecy. You're not anointed by the Holy Spirit.

I'm supposed to judge prophets. Paul said, let the prophets speak two or three and let the others judge. And so we are supposed to judge prophecies.

And if someone says, well, don't you respect the word of God? How dare you set up your puny discernment and personal judgment against the word of the Lord? Well, that's not what I'm doing. I'm using my puny judgment and discernment to decide if that's the word of the Lord. It's because I respect the word of the Lord enough not to go for counterfeits.

Those who would not wish for their words to be judged should not speak, because they don't respect the word of God enough to allow the church to know for sure whether it is the word of God or not, or just the word of man who wants you to think it's the word of God. I was in a meeting at our own school in Oregon once, and we had a guest speaker leading the meeting, and he said, anyone here who has a prophetic word, we want you to feel free to give it during the meeting. Well, I'm okay with that, but I said, and we'll judge it.

Well, I didn't realize that he was very offended by that. He told me later, he says, that was very offensive. Don't you know that no one now would give a prophetic word knowing that we're going to judge it? I'd say, well, then they shouldn't give it.

If someone invited me to speak at a place and said, now, Steve, you can teach whatever

you want, but we're going to judge what you say. If I said, oh, then I won't speak then. Well, what am I saying? I'm saying I don't think what I'm saying is genuine enough to pass scrutiny.

Anyone who speaks for God should be willing to be scrutinized and corrected if their word is not really from the Lord. And I believe it's very common nowadays for some people to say, thus saith the Lord, and it's not the Lord. But then it's equally common in the other sector to not accept any prophetic utterances today and act like the gift of prophecy doesn't exist anymore.

The gift of prophecy has existed from the time of Abel. It's pretty early in human history. Jesus said that Abel was a prophet.

In Luke 11, verse 50 and 51, Jesus said that the blood of all the prophets which was shed from the foundation of the world may be required of this generation from the blood of Abel to the blood of Zechariah who perished between the altar and the temple. Yes, I say to you, it shall be required of this generation. So he said the blood of all the prophets from Abel to Zechariah.

Jesus included Abel as a prophet. Right as soon as the human race got started, God started giving prophets. To suggest that he stopped giving prophets after the apostles died is an entirely artificial suggestion.

Certainly nothing in the Bible gives a slightest hint that God has had such a change of character that he doesn't want to speak anymore or that he only wants to write letters to people and doesn't want them to ever hear his voice anymore. However, as in all times, prophets need to be careful that they're discerning correctly what the word of the Lord is. And I myself have never prophesied.

I've been in charismatic meetings for 43 years. I got filled with the spirit back in 1970, 42 years I guess. And many times prophecies were being given and there's times I had something come to my mind.

I wonder if that's from the Lord. I wonder if I should speak that, but I wouldn't. I may have been too reticent, but I respect the word of God too much to blab something out and claim it's the word of God when it might not be.

And I've never actually spoken prophetically in any circumstance, although maybe sometimes without knowing it at times. But I couldn't swear by that. But what is the purpose of prediction in prophecy? Many people think that God gave the gift of prophecy in order that we could have sort of a divinely authorized counterpart to fortune telling.

Because after all, people really do want to know what the future holds. It's a matter of curiosity to everybody. Who wouldn't like to know what the future holds? If you could just go into the future and come back with the knowledge of what happened.

You know, what happened in the stock market, what happened in the World Series in the future, or more importantly, what happened in your marriage or your children's lives or your own, how you're going to die, what your health is going to be like, what the economy is going to do. You know, who wouldn't like to know the future like that? So people go to fortune tellers, they go to, you know, palm readers and different folks to try to find out what the future is. Well, all of that's forbidden in scripture.

The Bible forbids any involvement with the occult. And I remember in the 1970s when I was first in the ministry that certain teachers on Bible prophecy, and there were many, there still are, but it was, I mean, it was a new franchise in the early 70s after Hal Lindsey wrote *The Late Great Planet Earth*, which was purported to be an explanation of biblical prophecy, there was this new franchise of Bible prophecy teachers all over. And I heard many of them, and in some respects I was one of them in my youth.

I mean, that's what I picked up on from them and repeated it. But I remember hearing them say things like that, what I just said. And people are always curious about the future.

God forbids us to go to the fortune tellers and occultists and so forth. So God has given us his own version. He's given us our own way of knowing the future reliably from him and not have to go to the demonic sources to get the information.

And that is prophecy, predictive prophecy. And this explanation certainly gave me and many others the impression that the reason God predicted things through the prophets was so that we could have our curiosity about the future satisfied. And so we wanted to study the book of Revelation a lot so that we'd understand the future.

You know what? The more I read the book of Revelation, the more I didn't understand the future. Would you say that in reading the book of Revelation you've got a real clear vision now of everything that's going to be happening in the next few years? Not I. The truth is that Bible prophecy doesn't give a clear picture of the future. It never really did.

What the Bible prophecy usually is, and if you've read it, you know, it's obscure. But then after it's fulfilled, it comes clear. Many times in the New Testament it says the disciples didn't understand the scripture which said that this must happen.

And then when Jesus did, they remembered it and said, oh yeah, that was that. In other words, so many times you can't even know what the scripture was saying until it happened. And then you say, oh, I see.

That's the thing that was predicted. And that's actually how it's supposed to be. But the question is, well, what good was it then? If I don't know even if it's a, you know, what the prophecy means until it happens, and by the time it happens, I would know the thing anyway without prophecy because I'm there, I see it, I can read it in the newspapers or

whatever.

Why give the prophecy in the first place? Well, the answer is give an inscription. It's just the opposite of what I was taught when I was young. It's not that God wants to satisfy our curiosity about the future.

Actually, prophecy cannot do that. But this is why. In John 13, 19, Jesus said, now I tell you before it comes so that when it does come to pass, you may believe that I am he.

In other words, the purpose of my prediction is not going to be fulfilled until the fulfillment of the prophecy comes. Then it will have served its purpose. It will demonstrate to you that I knew what I was talking about and therefore I am who I claim to be.

In other words, it provides credentials to the prophet. The fulfillment of the prophet's words prove that he is a prophet. That's what it's for.

You don't know if he's a prophet until the fulfillment comes. But when it comes, you say, oh, okay. And in chapter 14 of John, in verse 29, very similarly, Jesus says, and now I have told you before it comes that when it does come to pass, you may believe.

John 14, 29. So the purpose of prediction, Jesus said, is so that when it happens, you will know that the person who predicted it knew what he was talking about and could not have known such things without inspiration. The early 70s rock opera Jesus Christ Superstar was certainly no Christian production.

Its message is not Christian at all. But it had an interesting line in it after Peter denied Jesus three times. And of course, Jesus had predicted that in the upper room.

And Mary Magdalene in it has this line. She says, It's what he told us you would do. I wonder how he knew.

Well, that's a very important question. How did he know? How did he know Peter would deny him three times before the cocked crow twice? Well, that's the question, isn't it? And how did the prophets know these things? How did the prophets know how Babylon would fall or Tyre would fall? Or what empires would rise after their own time in succession to one another? Or what the Messiah would be like? How did they know those things? Well, the answer is they were inspired and that is the proof of it. That is their credential.

Predictive prophecy is the credential of a true prophet. When Mormons tell me, Why don't you believe in Joseph Smith as a prophet? I say, Well, why do you? I mean, not that I come at the question with disrespect. I just want to know if you're telling me that this man rose up, he's a prophet of God, he's restoring true Christianity in the last days, it's been lost for centuries, but this is the guy who knows it.

That's an interesting claim. Can you give me some reason to believe it? I mean, it's not enough to say I'll get a burning in my bosom because I think Hindus get some burning in their bosom once in a while, too, depending on how much curry they eat. And I've had a burning in my bosom from time to time, too.

But, I mean, that's really all the Mormon has to say. Supernaturally, there's a supernatural proof that Joseph Smith's a prophet. Oh, what is that? I got this burning inside when I asked God to show me if he was.

Well, don't you know that every religion has people who get burning inside? That's not enough. Let me see if Joseph Smith can predict the future on a regular basis and have it come true. That's what the Bible said is the proof that a man's a prophet.

Did he do that? He did not. In other words, he's just a man claiming to be a prophet. Why should anyone stake their lives on the veracity of what he said? Well, that's just it.

God wants us to stake our lives on the veracity of what his word says, and therefore, he wants us to have certain, unmistakable proof of when it is his word and when it is not. And that is what Moses said. How do you know the word of the Lord is not spoken? If he doesn't come to pass, it's not the word of the Lord.

If he leads you to follow other gods, that's not the word of the Lord. By the way, that sounds like Joseph Smith to me. He definitely raised new gods that Christianity had not taught and the Bible doesn't teach.

So, there are false prophets. John said there are many false prophets going out into the world. Some of them have movements that have got millions of followers.

Now, we're just about done here. I know we've only gone through the top part of the notes, but the rest won't take so long. The prophets are difficult, I said.

Why are they difficult? They are difficult for several reasons. First of all, we have to realize they were written thousands of years ago. It's likely that they are the only books, I should say that the biblical books are probably the only books the average modern person will read that are that old.

Now, there are books that are as old. There are Greek and Latin historians and philosophers and so forth whose works are available. There are other books that are ancient, but most of us don't spend very much time reading these ancient classics and we don't have special training in understanding them.

You have to realize that if you go to another culture today and learn their language and read their literature, you'll find they have idioms and so forth that you don't have in your language. You're going to have to learn things about their culture. You're going to have to make a special effort to learn, which the people who speak it, they grew up knowing

that stuff.

They don't have to make any special effort. Sometimes people say, why do you have to learn Greek and Hebrew and become a scholar to read the Bible? The Bible is written for common people. Yeah, it was written for common people who knew Greek and Hebrew.

That's why. They knew Greek and Hebrew like you know English or Korean or whatever your native language is. We don't.

That's why we have to become scholars to understand it. Common people in those days knew Greek better than our Greek scholars do. Also, not just the language, but the idiom and the thought.

We're talking about Middle Eastern people, not Western people, not modern people, but ancient people. Their ways of communicating are different than ours, and the prophets particularly. There's lots of idioms and things that are difficult for us.

In your notes, I've given examples of them. I won't look up any of these scriptures. They're just references to cases where you'll find this to be true.

There are, for example, references to historical events that are obscure. In Isaiah, for example, we're going to read about lengthy prophecies about the doom of Moab. Well, we don't have thorough records that have been preserved of what happened to Moab.

Some, a little bit, of ancient societies that have been destroyed. Not very many of them have left thorough records of the details. Histories of these ancient peoples are either absent or hard to find.

The Bible's an exception because it's the history of Israel that was preserved, we believe, by God's own providence. But apart from that, it's very unusual to find the history of some ancient, especially some obscure nation, preserved in detail for us. So we read prophecies about what's going to happen to Edom or about Moab or Ammon or somewhere like that.

In many cases, we don't know what happened. We don't have the information available. It wasn't preserved for us.

So that makes it hard. We're reading prophecies, and we're thinking, what's that? I wonder how that worked out. And we just don't know.

We probably never will in some cases. There are references, therefore, to obscure historical events. Also, there's poetic imagery.

Almost all the poets, excuse me, almost all the prophets use poetry as their literary medium. In any modern Bible, this becomes evident. I say modern because the King James Version does not set the type in such a way that you can tell when it's poetry and

when it's not.

Hebrew poetry has a very distinctive form. Scholars can recognize. The King James Version, when it was published, it wasn't interesting to them to identify the poetic versus the prose section, so they just set the whole text out in paragraph form.

But in a modern translation, any modern translation in English, will do otherwise. For example, I just opened it random, but this is a very good example. Look at Ecclesiastes Chapter 12.

If you have the New King James Version, as I do, or any modern translation, you'll find this. In this chapter, notice that in Ecclesiastes 12, verses 1 through 8, this is just a random example. Verses 1 through 8 are poetry.

Verses 9 through 13 are not. Well, 9 through 12. Then verse 13 and 14 are.

Now, can you see the difference in the way the type is set? Verses 9 through 12 are set in blocks of paragraph type. But the rest is set up in verse. That's because part of the material is written in poetry and some of it is not.

Now, if you take almost any chapter in Isaiah, just open it random to most of the chapters of Isaiah, and you'll see that most of the material is poetry. You'll find the same in Jeremiah. You'll find the same in many others.

Not all of it is. Some of it's block paragraphs. It's prose, but much of it is poetry.

Usually, the prophetic oracles are written in poetic form. Now, poetry, by nature, is different than prose. One thing about it is most poetry is not literal.

Most poetry is written in imaginative, flowery language imagery. It's impressionistic. It's to give a sense of a feeling and an impression, in many cases, more than straightforward information.

Now, information is in it. A poet is always expressing his ideas, but he's expressing them differently than he would if he was in a normal conversation. He's trying to make it artistic.

He's trying to make it have an impact on the emotions as well as on the mind. Because of that, many of the prophets, because they write in poetry, use language that's not literal, as is very evident. For example, they use apocalyptic imagery.

Now, apocalyptic refers to literature that's very much like the Book of Revelation. The Book of Revelation is called the Apocalypse in the Greek, and Apocalypse. You know, if you've read the Book of Revelation, it's a very unusual style of literature.

Well, that style also is found in many of the Old Testament prophets. When it's found

there, it's called apocalyptic style. Usually what that means is earthquakes and volcanoes and moving mountains and the earth cracking open and fire coming down from heaven.

These dramatic, earth-shaking events are used in apocalyptic literature, as can be easily demonstrated, to represent things like a war or the fall of an empire or something like that. You know, the stars falling from the sky happened when Babylon fell. The sun went dark.

The moon stopped giving its light when Egypt was conquered by Assyria, according to the prophets, or actually when they were conquered by Babylon. So this is called apocalyptic imagery. You see it in Revelation.

You see it in the Old Testament prophets as well. It's not what we are used to in our modern Western literature, but it's very common. We have to become accustomed to it in the Bible.

The use of hyperbole. What is hyperbole? Hyperbole is exaggeration, but it's not mere exaggeration. Usually we think of exaggeration as a way of being dishonest.

You exaggerate how much money you make. You exaggerate how young you are. You exaggerate how big the fish was that you caught that got away.

This is usually a form of lying, but hyperbole is not a form of lying. It's an exaggeration that everybody is supposed to recognize as an exaggeration. Like I told you a million times to turn off the lights when you leave the room.

Well, no one has ever said any one thing a million times. You don't have time in a lifetime to say the same thing a million times. No one expects that to be taken literally.

You didn't say it a million times that you don't mind. You didn't mean that you really said it a million times. You mean you said it more times than you care to remember.

That's an exaggeration for the sake of emphasis, for the sake of making your point strongly. Such exaggerations are found throughout the scripture. Jesus used them a lot.

You have to hate your father and your mother and your wife and children or you can't be my disciple. That's a hyperbole. You have to cut off your hand or your eye if it causes you to offend.

That's a hyperbole. These are exaggerations. These are making a point to almost a ridiculous extreme in order to get the point across.

There's lots of hyperbole in the Old Testament prophets too. It's one of the poetic devices. There are some examples given in your notes.

Also, spiritualized usage. By that I mean there's times when the prophet is talking about Israel or Zion or Jerusalem and you'll find that actually the material is talking about not the physical city of Jerusalem or the physical Mount Zion or the ethnic Israel. Many times it's talking about the redeemed people following the Messiah who we would call today the church.

Of course, Israel was called the church or ecclesia in the Greek Old Testament. The point is it's often not the physical but the spiritual. How do we know that? In most cases we know it because the New Testament will quote those verses and make that application for us.

In some cases what we would maybe tend to take literally is actually meant of a spiritual thing and those have to be identified. They can be in most cases by certain factors, especially New Testament usage. The prophets do strange things like act out their messages.

There are acted out parables. Isaiah walked around Jerusalem naked for three years to make a point. Jeremiah put a yoke over his neck like an ox would wear to make a point.

Ezekiel cut off all his hair and chopped it up and he actually made three sections of his hair and burned some of it and chopped some of it and threw some of it into the wind to make a point. These guys were acting out their message. Hosea married a woman whom he knew would be unfaithful to him to make a point.

Jeremiah was told not to get married to make a point. Ezekiel was told not to weep when his wife died to make a point. These prophets had to live out their message and sometimes illustrate them visibly because a picture is worth a thousand words.

Also the things they did were strange, but that's on purpose. The strangeness of their actions sticks in the mind. If you see something ordinary you don't remember you even saw it.

You see something really weird you tell everyone you saw, hey, I saw the weirdest thing today. I don't know what it means. Well, the strangeness of their actions is intentional.

It gets attention. It raises curiosity. It sticks in the mind.

And so God often commanded these prophets to act out these things. There's also what we could call typological usage of information. Types mean things in the Old Testament that foreshadow something in the New Testament.

One thing that probably everyone's familiar with would be Old Testament sacrifices would be a type and shadow of Christ's sacrifice on the cross. The New Testament says there are types. The term is used in the Greek New Testament, tupos, it means a pattern or a mold.

And so a thing in the Old Testament can be a pattern for something that's going to be happening spiritually in the New Testament. And there are, for example, in the prophets they often speak about the Exodus when they're really talking about something typological. They're talking about Jesus delivering us.

Even Moses and Elijah on the Mount of Transfiguration speaking to Jesus in Luke 9 spoke to him of the Exodus that Jesus was going to accomplish in Jerusalem. As Moses had accomplished an Exodus in Egypt, it was a type and a shadow, a foreshadowing of the Exodus Christ would accomplish in Jerusalem. That is the deliverance of his people from sin as opposed to the deliverance of the people from Egypt.

Egypt and the Exodus were a type of salvation. Also the deliverance of the Jews from Babylon in the time of Zerubbabel and the time of Cyrus. That is used in the prophets as a type also of New Testament salvation.

Not always obvious, but again it becomes obvious when the New Testament writers quote those verses and apply them that way. And that really brings us to our final point. I'm just out of time now.

Our final point is that the New Testament is indeed the code breaker for us. How do we know that certain things in the prophets mean something different than we would have thought them to mean? We might get a hunch about it. We might feel like God is showing me it means such and such.

And we might be right, but how would we know if we're right? It's subjective. But there is an objective code breaker and that's called the New Testament. The New Testament quotes from the prophets extensively and applies the prophecies to events and situations that are identifiable to us in the New Testament so that we can actually look back and see that the New Testament understood the scripture this certain way and it must be how it was intended.

And this is surprising sometimes. In 1 Peter 1, verses 10-12, Peter said that the prophets of old did not understand their own writings. It said they searched diligently to know what manner of time they were speaking about.

But he says God showed them that it was not for them to know but for us who have heard the gospel preached. In other words, Old Testament prophets themselves, they knew what God had said, but they didn't know what he meant. But the New Testament writers did.

How often did Paul say? About four or five times. These things were hidden from generations and sons of men in the past but are now revealed through his spirit to the holy apostles and prophets. That is to say, things that were unclear in the Old Testament were made clear in the New.

In Luke 24-45, after his resurrection, Jesus met with his disciples in the upper room. In Luke 24-45, it says Jesus then opened their understanding that they might understand the scriptures. The only scriptures there were were Old Testament.

There was no New Testament. Jesus opened their understanding so they'd understand the Old Testament scriptures. Why? Couldn't they just go talk to a rabbi about it? No, the rabbis didn't understand it.

The prophets themselves didn't understand it. How could the rabbis who were uninspired understand it? Why should we believe that the uninspired Jewish rabbis correctly understood the prophets when Jesus had opened supernaturally the understanding of his disciples so they would understand them? In other words, there were meanings in the prophets that the Holy Spirit intended but no one would get without the Holy Spirit letting us know. And he let the disciples know so that when they wrote and they said, this fulfilled that scripture, this fulfilled that scripture, they were right.

It might be that we would not have taken it that way ourselves. We wouldn't have seen the connection. In some cases, it seems like they're really stretching.

But Jesus opened their understanding so what they said is true. What they said breaks the code. In 2 Corinthians 3, in verse 14, it's in your notes, Paul said that there's a veil that remains to this day over the eyes and the minds of Jewish people when they read the Old Testament because they don't understand what it means.

It's like God has put a veil over theirs. There's this obscurity about the Old Testament prophets that the natural man cannot receive. Paul said in 1 Corinthians 2, in verse 14, the natural man cannot receive the things of the Spirit of God.

They're spiritually discerned. They're foolishness to the natural man. So the Jewish rabbi who, of course, came up with all the original interpretations of the prophets which belong to Orthodox Judaism today, that rabbi is a natural man.

He's not a spiritual man. He's just an ordinary guy who went to study under another rabbi. The prophets he's reading didn't even understand what they're saying.

He certainly doesn't. There's a veil over his heart. He doesn't understand.

But Paul said in 2 Corinthians 3, but when they turn to the Lord, the veil is removed. When you come to Christ and receive the Holy Spirit and you come under the teaching of Christ and his apostles, then that veil is removed. The real meaning of the prophets comes out.

So when we study the prophets together, we will spend our time trying to understand what the apostles said was the meaning of these things because we could guess, we could speculate, until the cows come home, we might be very creative and come up with

some really interesting stuff, but there would be no authority in it. It won't be the right interpretation if it's not according to what the apostles said. They're the ones that Jesus illuminated and told them what it really means.

Otherwise, it's going to remain obscure. So the most fruitful way to study the Old Testament is through the New Testament glasses, using the New Testament as the code breaker, and that's what we'll do as we study the prophets together.