

The Deep Things of God **by Jon Paulien**

Chapter Two

The Patterns of Bible Prophecy

Prophets are making a comeback in today's world. The *National Enquirer* tabloid is full of them. Perhaps you've heard of Nostradamus, the sixteenth century French physician and chef of Jewish heritage. Born to a father forced to convert to Catholicism around 1501, Nostradamus became renowned on account of predictions that seemed to come true a short time after they were made. Emboldened by his success at predicting the near future, Nostradamus tried his hand at predicting major events over the following two thousand years or so. He laid out his predictions in a thousand four-line poems or quatrains, divided into 'centuries' of a hundred each. Many of his predictions were even attached to specific dates.

The most famous of Nostradamus' dated predictions was his prediction for the year 1999:

The year 1999, seven months,
From the sky will come a great King of terror,
To resuscitate the great king of Angoulmois;
Before, after, Mars will reign by good luck.¹

This language is clearly ambiguous. Many looked for its fulfillment in terms of a meteor shower or some other heavenly event. Most of these also anticipated that some significant conflict that may break out during the year, in not it the month of July itself. But the date came and went and nothing of the sort was observed.

In the mid-60s I was aware of another alleged prophet named Jean Dixon. She claimed to have insight into detailed future events. Two of her predictions seemed verifiable enough that I made note of them and watched for the fulfillment. One of these predictions was that the unpopular views of Barry Goldwater (remember him?), a losing Republican candidate for the presidency in 1964, would be vindicated within the next decade. I'm not aware that that ever occurred. Another prediction of hers was that the scrapping of a miniature military missile project would prove to be a huge mistake by the end of the 1970s. That missile was never missed as far as I know. The concept of prophets is something we're used to. The concept of successful prophets is another matter.

One of the first things you notice about the Book of Revelation is its claim to be a written prophecy (Revelation 1:3 and 22:10). For those who know the Bible, that recalls the Old Testament where there are many examples of prophetic writings: Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Daniel, Zechariah, and Malachi among others. The Bible contains many models of what prophecy is like. As we examine these models we gain a clearer understanding of how to read the prophecies of Revelation.

The exciting thing about the Book of Revelation is that it makes a number of predictions about the future. Many of these predictions are still unfulfilled. This raises the question as to how we can accurately understand prophecies that are yet unfulfilled. What can we learn about our future from Revelation? How can we avoid the interpretive mistakes of the past? ***The only safe way to interpret unfulfilled prophecy is to understand how prophecy was fulfilled in the past.*** The Bible contains many prophecies that were already fulfilled within the biblical context. As we study these fulfilled prophecies, we can learn how to handle the unfulfilled prophecies of Revelation in a responsible way.

So in this chapter we will take a look at the patterns of Bible prophecy. We will observe ***how*** prophecy works throughout the Bible. We will look at how the language used to describe the future compares to the actual events which correspond to that language. In this chapter we are not looking at Revelation itself, but discovering the broad biblical groundwork for how Revelation should be understood. As we look at the entire Biblical witness we will see patterns of prophecy that continue in the book of Revelation.

Four Mighty Acts of God

When you look at the big picture of the Old Testament you discover that everything centers on four major acts of God, Creation, the Flood, the Exodus, and the Return from Babylonian Exile. Most of the prophecies in the Old Testament were concerned about one or more of these four great events. At first glance it may not appear that this process has much to

do with Revelation. It will, however, provide the foundation upon which a sound understanding of Revelation can be based. We will begin at the beginning.

Creation and the Flood

In the original Hebrew of Genesis the Flood (Gen 6-9) is described as an undoing of Creation (Gen 1-2). When you compare these two stories, you notice that the Flood is a piece by piece undoing of the creation. The destruction of the Flood is followed by a re-creation that puts the world back together again. While this is obvious to the reader of the Hebrew you can also see a lot through a closer look at the English text.

In creation, for example, God followed a process of separation and distinction. He separated the waters from the dry land (Gen 1:9). He used the atmosphere to separate the waters above from the waters below (Gen 1:7). And that's not all. "God saw that the light was good, and **he separated the light from the darkness.**" (Gen 1:4) "And God said, 'Let there be lights in the expanse of the sky to separate the day from the night, and let them serve as signs to mark seasons and days and years.'" (Gen 1:14) Separation and distinction, then, are the **how** of the creation process.

Now let's compare the above texts with the way the Flood is described. "In the six hundredth year of Noah's life, on the seventeenth day of the second month--on that day all **the springs of the great deep burst forth, and the floodgates of the heavens were opened.** And rain fell on the earth forty days and forty nights." (Gen 7:11-12) According to this text, the waters under the earth came up and the waters above the earth came down. What God had

separated in the creation came together and that which was distinct became unified again. The Flood was a reversal of the separation and distinction that took place at Creation.

“The waters rose and covered the mountains to a depth of more than twenty feet.” (Gen 7:20) In creation, the waters were separated from the dry land; in the Flood, the waters once again cover the dry land. In other words, the destructions of the Flood return the earth to the condition it was in before Creation: “Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters (Gen 1:2, cf. 8:1).” So the Flood is described as a bit by bit undoing of the Creation.

In Creation there were not only distinctions but also unities. These unities included the relationship between Adam and God, between Adam and Eve, and between the human pair and their environment. In the flood story these unities are also reversed. The Flood occurs because of a breakdown in the human relationship with God (Gen 6:5-7,12-13). People also begin to hate and murder one another (Gen 4:-8,23-24; 6:13). The environment falls apart and the human ability to control the environment is destroyed (Gen 6:17; 7:10-11,23). So, in the flood story, that which was separate in creation comes together and that which was united is torn apart.

The decisive point is this: the *language* of the flood story is the language of the creation. The flood story applies the very same language used in the description of the original creation. Then when the destruction of the Flood are over and the waters have gone down, Genesis 8-9 describes the re-creation of the world. “But God remembered Noah and all the

wild animals and the livestock that were with him in the ark, and he sent a *wind* over the earth and the waters receded.” (Gen 8:1)

With this “wind” (same Hebrew word as “spirit” in Gen 1:2) the process of re-creation after the Flood began. The language of this re-creation parallels the language of the original creation. Once again the dry land appears (Gen 8:13); there is a renewal of the seasons (Gen 8:22); and there is talk of human beings in the image of God (Gen 9:6). And this time the distinctions God has created are guaranteed: “I establish my covenant with you: Never again will all life be cut off by the waters of a flood; never again will there be a flood to destroy the earth.” (Gen 9:11)

What I hope is clear at this point is that the *language* of God's second mighty act--the Flood--is parallel to that of the first mighty act--the Creation. The Flood is the destruction of the original creation. God takes His own creation apart, much as a child might take a Lego creation apart piece by piece. He then rebuilds it piece by piece in the same *language* and style as the original creation.

But the parallels do not end there, Noah, the chief figure in the flood story, is described as a “second Adam.” At creation, the animals are brought to Adam, in the flood story the animals are brought to Noah. “Pairs of creatures that have the breath of life in them came to Noah and entered the ark” (Gen 7:15). Note the similarity of language in the instructions God gives to Adam and Noah:

Genesis 1:26-30

“Then God said, ‘Let us make man in our image, in our likeness, and let them rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air, over the livestock, over all the earth, and over all the creatures that move along the ground. . . .’ God blessed them and said to them, ‘Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and over every living creature that moves on the ground.’ Then God said, ‘I give you every seed-bearing plant on the face of the whole earth and every tree that has fruit with seed in it. They will be yours for food. And to all the beasts of the earth and all the birds of the air and all the creatures that move on the ground--everything that has the breath of life in it--I give every green plant for food.’ And it was so.”

Gen 9:1-3

"Then God blessed Noah and his sons, saying to them, 'Be fruitful and increase in number and fill the earth. The fear and dread of you will fall upon all the beasts of the earth and all the birds of the air, upon every creature that moves along the ground, and upon all the fish of the sea; they are given into your hands. Everything that lives and moves will be food for you. Just as I gave you the green plants, I now give you everything. . . .'"

Noah’s diet is prescribed by God just as Adam’s was in the original creation.

Noah is described, therefore, as a second Adam, a new Adam. In fact, the very language of the Hebrew is parallel. The name "Adam" means “earth.” Using the very same Hebrew term Gen 9:20 says, “Noah, a man of the soil (Heb: *adamah*), proceeded to plant a vineyard.” Noah was a man of the earth. Was Adam a man of the earth? “And the LORD God formed man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and man became a living being.” (Gen 2:7) Furthermore, just as Adam fell into sin and shame by eating from the fruit of a tree (Gen 3:5-10), Noah shamed himself by drinking from the fruit of the vine (Gen 9:20-23). It says of Adam that when he ate the fruit, his eyes were opened (Gen 3:5,7). It says

of Noah that after he became drunk, he awoke and he realized what had happened to him (Gen 9:24).

There are amazing and purposeful parallels between the story of creation and the story of the Flood. When the Flood is described, the language of Creation is used. When the new creation after the Flood is described, the language of Creation is used again. In other words, God used the language of the past to describe His working in the present:

Creation	The Flood
Waters cover earth	Waters cover earth
Spirit overshadows waters	Wind blows over waters
Waters divided	Ark passes through waters
Dry land appears	Dry land appears
Image of God	
Dominion over earth	Animals afraid of Noah
Fruitful and multiply	Fruitful and multiply
Adam	Second Adam (Noah)
Formed from the earth	Man of the soil
Put to sleep	
Woman formed	New earth formed
Shamed by fruit of tree	Shamed by fruit of vine
Paradise	
Tree of life	
Test	
Serpent	
Covenant implied	Covenant renewed

When you compare the two stories, it becomes evident that, in these two mighty acts, God was acting according to a consistent pattern. You could say that God's actions in the creation story predicted His actions in the time of the Flood. Since **God is consistent**, His past actions are predictive of His future actions.

But while the pattern between the two accounts is plain, there are also differences between the Flood and the creation story. There is no serpent in the Noah story, no testing tree, nor a Tree of Life, and no woman plays a prominent role. So not all the elements of the creation story are repeated in the flood story. God is consistent, but not mindlessly so. God uses the language of the past to describe His later actions, but the correspondence is not point by point. God is consistent, but ***He is not predictable***. We will see this pattern again in God's third mighty act of the Old Testament, the Exodus.

The Exodus Story

The creation account begins with a formless earth covered by water (Gen 1:2). The flood story begins with the chaos of sin (Gen 6:5-7) and then describes the earth's return to the condition it was in before creation began (Gen 1:2; 7:18-20; 8:1). But in the Exodus story there is a significant difference. Instead of the waters covering the whole earth they are a limited body of water called the Red Sea. The waters aren't worldwide. So the story of the Exodus would seem to be very different from Creation or the Flood at first glance.

The Hebrew version of the Red Sea crossing, nevertheless, mirrors the language of both the Creation and the Flood. The use of language is so clear that it can be seen even in English: "Then Moses stretched out his hand over the sea, and all that night the LORD drove the sea back with a strong east ***wind*** and turned it into ***dry land***. The ***waters were divided*** and the Israelites went through the sea on ***dry ground***, with a wall of water on their right and on their left" (Exod 14:21-22).

The biblical writer carefully chose the highlighted words in the above passage to recall the account of creation. Other Hebrew words could have been chosen to describe the historical event in an accurate way. But the language chosen specifically and intentionally recalls the Creation. “Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the *Spirit* of God was hovering over the waters.” (Gen 1:2) In the Hebrew, the word for “spirit” and the word for “wind” are the same. There is a “wind from God” moving over the waters in the original creation and a “wind from God” moving over the waters of the Red Sea. The result in both cases is that the “waters were divided”--the same Hebrew language as in Genesis 1:6-7.

Exodus 14 also tells us that the Israelites went through the sea on “dry ground.” There are many Hebrew words the author could have chosen to describe dry ground. The actual word used in Exodus 14 is the same word used in Genesis 1 to describe the dry land of the original creation (Gen 1:9-10). Since other Hebrew words could have been chosen to describe the Exodus, the author clearly interprets the Exodus as a mighty act of God according to the pattern of the Creation (and also the Flood). In other words, God uses the language of Creation and the Flood to describe the Exodus.

Having observed the pattern, we begin to see many other parallels between the Exodus and God’s previous acts. “Then say to Pharaoh, ‘This is what the LORD says: Israel is my firstborn son’” (Exod 4:22). Who was God's firstborn son in terms of the whole human race? Adam. But in Exodus 4, God describes the whole nation of Israel as his firstborn son. Just as the

original Adam had dominion over the earth (Gen 1:26, 28), Israel is given the dominion over the land of Canaan (Exod 6:4; Lev 25:38).

Just as God created Adam and Eve in the original creation, so now God creates a people--Israel. In the original Garden, God gave Adam and Eve a Tree of Life to keep them alive and healthy (Gen 2:9; 3:22), in the Exodus story God provides the equivalent of the Tree of Life. God uses miraculous bread (manna-- Exodus 16) to keep them alive in the wilderness. Just as Adam was tested by the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil (Gen 2:15-17; 3:3, 11-13), in the Exodus story He tested His people several times to see if they would be faithful to Him (Exod 16:4; 20:20; Deut 8:2, 16).

“Remember how the LORD your God led you all the way in the desert these forty years, to humble you and to test you in order to know what was in your heart, whether or not you would keep his commands. He humbled you, causing you to hunger and then feeding you with manna, which neither you nor your fathers had known, to teach you that man does not live on bread alone but on every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD.”

Deut 8:2-3

There are still other parallels. Just as there was a test in both Eden and the wilderness, so there was also a serpent in both (Gen 3:1ff.; Num 21: 5-9). Just as God made covenants with the original Adam and with Noah (Gen 1:26-30, cf. Gen 9:1-3), He also made a covenant with Israel (Exodus 19-20). We see parallel after parallel between the work of God in the Exodus story and the work of God in the creation story and the flood story.

But once again there are some differences between the accounts. The exodus account, in many ways, is a spiritualization of features in the creation and flood accounts. For example, the chaos of the waters around the earth is parallel not only to the Red Sea but also to the

slavery of the Israelites. The Israelite situation was a spiritual mess (Exod 1:8-22). They needed God's creative power to get them out of Egypt (Exod 3:7-10). So the chaos of Israel's condition was a spiritual chaos. In the story of the Exodus, *the literal things of the Creation are spiritualized* to show the consistency of God's actions in both accounts. The counterpart of Adam and Eve is Israel. The Garden of Eden becomes Canaan or Palestine. In the Exodus God

Creation	The Flood	The Exodus
Chaos	Chaos	Spiritual chaos
Waters cover earth	Waters cover earth	Red Sea
Spirit overshadows waters	Wind blows over waters	Wind blows over waters
Waters divided	Ark passes through waters	Waters divided
Dry land appears	Dry land appears	Dry land appears
Image of God		First born
Dominion over earth	Animals afraid of Noah	Dominion over Canaan
Fruitful and multiply	Fruitful and multiply	As the sands of the sea
Adam	Second Adam (Noah)	Creation of a people
Formed from the earth	Man of the soil	Land of Canaan
Put to sleep		
Woman formed	New earth formed	
Shamed by fruit of tree	Shamed by fruit of vine	
Paradise		Canaan
Tree of life		Manna
Test		Test in wilderness
Serpent		Serpent
Covenant implied	Covenant renewed	Covenant

was leading them to a land flowing with milk and honey, well-watered, like the Garden of Eden (Exod 3:8,17; Num 13:27).

As was the case with the flood story, not all the details of the original creation are repeated in the exodus account. The wedding of Adam and Eve (Gen 2:23-25; 4:1), the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil (2:9, 16-17; 3:11), the sleep of Adam that resulted in the creation

of Eve (Gen 2:21-22), and the creation of sun, moon and stars (Gen 1:14-19) are all elements of the creation story that seem to find no parallel in the Exodus.

At the same time, the exodus story contains new details that set the stage for later works of God. Moses, as a child, escapes from Pharaoh's attempts to kill him (Exod 2:1-10, cf. Matt 2:13-18). He is saved along with the people of Israel by the blood of the Passover (Exod 12:1-30; 1 Cor 5:7). God tests the Israelites for forty years in the wilderness (Num 14:34-35; Matt 4:1-10). Adam and Eve don't themselves pass through the divided waters of the Creation (Gen 1:7-9) but Israel actually passes through the waters that are divided. And in the exodus story, there are actually two dividings of the waters--the first when they pass through the Red Sea and the second when they pass through the Jordan River. So we see in the exodus account some fascinating similarities and differences with the original accounts of Creation and the Flood. There is a clear pattern in God's saving actions, but God is not mindlessly tied to the pattern.

Learning From the Pattern

I would encourage you to put the above observations to the test. Look up the texts I have listed along the way. Then read the books of Genesis and Exodus through for yourself. Compare the stories of God's three mighty acts. Can you see how the *language* is taken up from one story to the next?

So what can we learn from this series of patterns? What does this study have to do with prophecy? What does it have to do with the book of Revelation? I believe that five major

insights about God have emerged from our brief study of the Creation, the Flood and the Exodus. These insights provide a major key to open the prophecies of Revelation.

1) **God is consistent.** His past actions set the pattern for His later actions. What He did at the Creation sets the pattern for what He did at the Red Sea. The two events are very different and yet the same God is at work in both instances. What He does now reminds us of what He did then. What He is doing now sets the pattern for what He will do later on. He is faithful to His promises. You can count on God. He is consistent. But this insight needs to be qualified by a second one.

2) **God is not predictable.** While God is consistent He is not predictable. You have to let God be God. He is consistent in the way He approaches people, events, and circumstances but His later activities do not carry out every detail of the pattern. God's consistency is not a mindless, point-by-point consistency. Sometimes people assume that every detail of God's past must be carried out in exactly the same way in the future. So they assume that in unfulfilled prophecies God will do in minute detail exactly what He has said. But we must be careful not to put God in a box. We must let God be God. According to the Bible, God's later activity carries out much of the pattern but not *all* the pattern.

3) **God is creative.** God's later actions develop His earlier ones and often enhance them. God's revelation of Himself grows and develops as His people become able to grasp it. The antitype doesn't just carry out the type as a point by point correspondence. God can transcend what He has done before and He is not limited to the details of His previous patterns.

When you compare prophecy and fulfillment in the Bible, therefore, you discover a creative God who operates freely within the limits of His overall consistency. He is not bound to carry out every detail, neither is He hindered from introducing something new. Sometimes a prophecy that could have been fulfilled in one way at one point in time is fulfilled in a different way at a different time. Circumstances alter cases. As time moves on, we find God operating in creative ways to fulfill His word.

4) ***God meets people where they are.*** Whenever God reveals Himself, He does so within the time, place and circumstances of the one who receives the revelation. When God speaks to a prophet, he speaks in the ***language*** of the prophet, language the prophet has learned naturally from his own past. And, frankly, could a prophet understand a message from God if it were given in a language he could not understand? Of course not.

You see, language is based on the sum total of our past experience. The only language we know is what we learn from babyhood on up. A two-year old toddles around and hears somebody say “appreciate.” The child files that sound away for a couple of weeks and then hears someone say it again. By the third or fourth time, the toddler begins to have a sense of what that word means, what it means in context, how that word is generally expressed. So the ***language*** that we all speak is the language of our own personal past. That is why God spoke to the writers of the Bible in the language of their past. God’s revelations always come within the time, place and circumstances in which the recipients lived.

The point I am getting at is that language is more than just Spanish, French, English and Swahili. Even among those who speak English there are vast differences in the way things are

defined and the way culture expresses itself. The English of the “Baby Boomer” is quite different from the English of the “Post-Modern” young person. So even though the same language is being spoken, each person’s unique experience affects what they understand and how they understand. The soundest way to apply unfulfilled prophecy, then, is to understand its meaning in terms of the language of the times in which it was originally written. If you want to understand Revelation, therefore, the soundest way to approach the book is in the language of John's past, language as he would have grasped it around 95 A.D.

I once had an ongoing discussion with a friend who also studied Revelation. It seemed that we disagreed on every text. If I said anything about a text, he said something different. And no amount of evidence seemed to change anything. Finally, it dawned on me what was happening. I said, “You know, I'm studying the book of Revelation as if it was written in 95 A.D., you're studying the book as if it were written in 1995.” I expected that my “brilliant” insight would settle the matter in my favor. But he had a surprise up his sleeve.

He acknowledged first that what I said was true. It was the first time we had agreed on anything! He agreed that he was applying to Revelation the language and concepts of his day. He was reading the book as an Adventist of the 90s. And further, he argued, that was exactly what he thought God would want him to do! For him, the book of Revelation would only make sense if he read it in the context of everything an Adventist knows and believes.

The biblical evidence, however, tells us that “reading Revelation like an Adventist” is not appropriate for the study of an ancient book in which God meets writers where they are. We should not read Revelation as if John was familiar with Ellen White. We should not read

Revelation as if John were familiar with the SDA Bible Commentary. The message God has placed for us in the book of Revelation will be found in the language and perspective of the original situation in which God met John.

5) ***There is a spiritualization of the type***. Beginning with the exodus event, we see a spiritualization of some of the types. In other words, the language of God's successive actions moves from literal to spiritual (from Flood to slavery, for example). It also moves from global to more localized (from worldwide Flood to Red Sea). God can use the language of the past in literal terms at times (as in the Flood story's reminiscences of Creation), but He can also use the same language to describe something more spiritual and more local (as in the account of the Exodus). The basic scenario and language is repeated, but He uses that language in a figurative, spiritualized form, moving from Adam to Israel or from Eden to Palestine. The same language is used but the meanings of the words are now expanded in a spiritual way.

These patterns in God's activity are vital for our study of the book of Revelation. As we see how God fulfilled the promises and prophecies of the past, we gain a clearer picture of His workings in our present and future. As we move toward the book of Revelation, we will next examine the Old Testament prophets, whose writings span from Isaiah to Malachi in the Bible. The five principles we have developed are further confirmed by this next stage of God's dealings with His people Israel.

The New Exodus

If you were to read the Bible through from Isaiah to Malachi you would discover that the major theme running through the prophets is Judah's exile to Babylon and subsequent return. If the pattern we have seen so far continues in the prophets, what language would the prophets use to describe the Exile? The language of the Exodus, God's mightiest act of deliverance from captivity. God would work in the captivity to Babylon as He had worked in the Egyptian captivity. So when the prophets write about the Exile, they write about it in terms of the Exodus. They describe the return from exile as a "New Exodus." God plans to repeat the Exodus all over again. To put it another way, ***God is consistent.***

Hosea. Let's begin our study of this New Exodus with the earliest of these writing prophets. Hosea prophesied around 760 B.C. (Another biblical prophet who wrote during this time is the prophet Amos.) The Israel of David and Solomon had tragically divided, producing two nations--Israel and Judea--where there had formerly been only one. While the dual kingdoms never returned to the full glory of Solomon's reign, the time of Hosea found both at the height of their prosperity. Jereboam II was king in Israel and of all the northern Israelite kings, he was probably the most powerful and successful (2 Kings 14:23-29). But when God's people become prosperous they tend to forget that it is the blessing of God that enables people to get wealth. That's what happened to Israel.

“She (meaning Israel) has not acknowledged that I was the one
who gave her the grain, the new wine and oil,
who lavished on her the silver and gold--
which they used for Baal.

Hos 2:8 NIV

In her prosperity Israel forgot Who had provided that prosperity. Israel forgot who commanded the rain to water the earth. Israel forgot who provided the grain, the new wine, and the oil. Instead of serving God with the wealth He had provided, Israel used her wealth to turn away from Him. God decides to respond by removing the wealth that had become an obstacle to Israel's relationship with Him.

Therefore I will take away my grain when it ripens,
and my new wine when it is ready.
I will take back my wool and my linen,
intended to cover her nakedness.
So now I will expose her lewdness
before the eyes of her lovers;
no one will take her out of my hands.
I will stop all her celebrations:
her yearly festivals,
her New Moons,
her Sabbath days--
all her appointed feasts.
I will ruin her vines and her fig trees,
which she said were her pay from her lovers;
I will make them a thicket,
and wild animals will devour them.
I will punish her for the days
she burned incense to the Baals;
she decked herself with rings and jewelry,
and went after her lovers,
but me she forgot,'
declares the LORD."

Hosea 2:9-13 NIV

God here describes the future exile that Israel would experience. At that time He would take away the grain, new wine, oil, technology, everything--even their feasts, temple services, and worship. All these would be taken away when they went into exile. Because they had forsaken God, God does not intervene to stop the nation's decline and fall. But there is good

news mixed in with the bad. God sends them into exile, not as a final rejection, but in order to win them back.

“Therefore I am now going to **allure** her;
I will lead her into the desert
and speak tenderly to her.
I will give her back her vineyards,
and will make the Valley of Achor a door of hope.
There she will sing as in the days of her youth,
as in the day she came up out of Egypt.”
Hos 2:14-15

Notice the word “allure.” God seeks a relationship with Israel in terms of the eagerness with which a young man might court a young woman. What desert is he talking about here? The desert of Sinai. God is recalling the Exodus, an earlier stage in His relationship with Israel. Family counselors tell us that any time a marriage is in trouble, the best thing to do is to remember the early attentions--go back to the activities, conversations, and relationships that put you in love in the first place. As you renew the early attentions, love often returns in force. So God here is describing His relationship with Israel as a relationship between a husband and a wife. The Exodus from Egypt was like a courtship stage in which God fell in love with Israel and Israel fell in love with Him. So when the relationship comes to a crisis, as recounted in Hosea, God remembers the Exodus from Egypt, the time of courtship and first love.

If Israel wishes to turn away from Him, however, God will allow her to go her own way. He will agree to the divorce. But He won't allow it to end there. Instead, God is going to start all over again and court her as if they were just meeting for the first time! He will bring her back to the place where they first fell in love--the wilderness of Sinai. And He will do everything in His power to restore the relationship to even better things than before.

Here's the point that is significant for us. In Hosea's prophecy of the Exile and the Return, he uses the language of the Exodus, the language of Egypt and the wilderness. There is no hint here of Babylon or the Euphrates River. In other words, God describes the exile to Babylon in terms of the Exodus from Egypt. ***He uses the language of the past to describe the future.***

So we can add a sixth principle of prophetic interpretation to the five that we discovered earlier in this chapter. When the writing prophets of the Old Testament speak of the Exile and of the return from Babylon, they tend to use the language of the Exodus. But here the language of the past is not used to describe the present, but the future. God prophesies the Exile in the language of the Exodus. Or to put it more generally: ***Prophets use the language of the past to describe the future.***

Micah. A contemporary of Hosea was the prophet Micah. He prophesied to the kingdom of Judah (just to the south) a short time after the prophecy recorded in Hosea 2. He too follows the pattern that we noticed in Hosea. In talking about the Exile, he uses the language of the Exodus.

"As in the days when you came out of Egypt,
I will show them my wonders.'
Nations will see and be ashamed,
deprived of all their power.
They will lay their hands on their mouths
and their ears will become deaf.
They will lick dust like a snake,
like creatures that crawl on the ground.
They will come trembling out of their dens;
they will turn in fear to the LORD our God
and will be afraid of you.
Who is a God like you,

who pardons sin and forgives the transgression
of the remnant of his inheritance?
You do not stay angry forever
but delight to show mercy.
You will ***again*** have compassion on us;
you will tread our sins underfoot
and hurl all our iniquities into the depths of the sea.
You will be true to Jacob,
and show mercy to Abraham,
as you pledged on oath to our fathers
in days long ago.”

Micah 7:15-20

Did you notice the word “again” in the above passage? “You will ***again*** have compassion on us.” “Again” combined with “As in the days when you came out of Egypt,” makes it clear that this is talking about a “New Exodus” which will be modeled on the first Exodus out of Egypt.

The principle of “spiritualizing the type” is very strong in this passage. The new Exodus will be as much spiritual as literal. God’s purpose for the New Exodus is to forgive His people and to restore their hearts to Him. He’s not primarily interested in having a nation with political power on His side. God is interested in a spiritual relationship with His people. He is not satisfied with merely a “name” relationship. He wants a heart relationship of genuine intimacy. In that sense this Exodus will transcend the previous one.

In Micah 7 the Exile and Return are once again described in terms of a New Exodus. But instead of the Red Sea, we have the “depths of the sea.” The sea here is not a physical barrier that will be physically divided, it is the place where they leave their sins behind. Micah prophesies that they will leave their sins and transgressions in Babylon and when they come

back home, they are going to be faithful to God. So the prophecy of the Exile builds on the language of the Exodus in a spiritual way.

Isaiah. Isaiah prophesied just a few years after Hosea and Micah. He too describes the Exile in the language of the Exodus.

“The LORD will dry up the gulf of the Egyptian sea;
with a scorching wind he will sweep his hand
over the Euphrates River.
He will break it up into seven streams
so that men can cross over in sandals.
There will be a highway for the remnant of his people
that is left from Assyria,
**as there was for Israel
when they came up from Egypt.”**
Isaiah 11:15-16

In this text it is the Euphrates River that functions as a parallel to the Red Sea of the Exodus. A highway of return from Assyria would cross over the Euphrates River. It will be a New Exodus all over again. When Israel comes out of captivity it will pass through the Euphrates River in a way similar to the way Israel passed through the Red Sea.

Do you remember the principle that **God is consistent**? What God did for His people in Egypt, He will do again when they return from the Exile. Isaiah uses the language of the past to describe the future. But that isn't all that is going on here. The Exile can be described in terms of the Exodus but **God is not bound to the entire pattern**. Did Israel actually return from Assyria? No. By the time of the Exile, Israel was no longer in existence. Only Judah was left. Assyria was also destroyed and Babylon has become the new superpower. Not only that, did the remnant of God's people actually pass through the Euphrates River in sandals? No, there were bridges across the Euphrates River right in the city of Babylon. How do you explain the

anomalies in this prophecy? **God meets people where they are.** At the time Isaiah was written, Israel had not yet been destroyed and Assyria still ruled the territory of Babylon. So the prophecy was given in the context of the time, place and circumstances of Isaiah's day. When the fulfillment came circumstances had altered the case.

The Euphrates River did dry up, however. That happened when Cyrus, king of Persia, came and surrounded Babylon. Since Babylon's walls seemed too difficult to take by siege Cyrus tried to find some way to get around its defenses. He did that by diverting the Euphrates River--drying up its waters--and marching his soldiers along the river bed, under the walls, into the city. In principle the Exodus happened again, but many details were different this time.

God is consistent but He is not predictable. He meets people where they are at each stage of the historical drama.

Another text in Isaiah takes a slight turn from the previous one. It begins with the language of the Exodus again, but then shifts to something new.

"This is what the LORD says--
he who made **a way through the sea,**
a path through the mighty waters,
who drew out **the chariots and horses,**
the army and reinforcements together,
and they lay there, never to rise again,
extinguished, snuffed out like a wick:
'Forget the former things;
do not dwell on the past.
See, I am doing a new thing!
Now it springs up; do you not perceive it?
I am making a way in the desert
and streams in the wasteland."

Isaiah 43:16-19

In this passage the Exodus still provides the model for the return from exile. There are references to passing through the waters, and the destruction of chariots, horses and armies. But the event to come is also a new thing that will transcend the Exodus. The past provides the language for the future, but once again **God is creative** and the fulfillment is not bound to the pattern in every detail.

I am emphasizing these principles because they provide the basis for making a sound analysis of unfulfilled prophecies. Many people treat unfulfilled prophecy as if it were written directly to them and to their own time and circumstances. They forget that when God gave the prophecy He did not use the language of their day but the language of the prophet's past. I cannot underestimate the importance of this principle. ***When you study a book like Revelation, the content concerns the prophet's future, but the language is the language of the prophet's past. We should not expect a point by point correspondence between every detail of the prophecy and its fulfillment.***

This last assertion is clearly illustrated in another passage from the book of Isaiah, one that is often used in conjunction with the book of Revelation.

***“Behold, I will create new heavens
and a new earth.
The former things will not be remembered,
nor will they come to mind.
But **be glad and rejoice forever
in what I will create,**
for I will create Jerusalem to be a delight
and its people a joy.
I will rejoice over Jerusalem
and take delight in my people;
**the sound of weeping and of crying
will be heard in it no more.”*****

Isaiah 65:17-19

Most people think of this passage as a description of *our* future. In fact, the book of Revelation actually uses this text to talk about the New Jerusalem that God has prepared for His people. But here in Isaiah, God is talking about the Exile and the Return. Some of the language has taken on an extended meaning over time (confirmed by inspiration), but when Isaiah writes he's talking about the Exile and the Return. If you read the chapter in context, you will see that it doesn't talk about eternal life and heaven, but rather about people living longer lives on this earth.

“Never again will there be in it
 an infant who lives but a few days,
 or an old man who does not live out his years;
he who dies at a hundred
 will be thought a mere youth;
he who fails to reach a hundred
 will be considered accursed.”

Isa 65:20

This is not a description of heaven the way the Revelator sees it (Rev 21:4)! Heaven as we understand it doesn't include death. But as a description of the mighty things God plans to do when they return from Exile, this text makes sense. In other places Isaiah has described the Exile in the language of the Exodus. But aspects of God's future mighty act are so great they can only be described in the language of Creation. Remember the principle of *spiritualizing the type*? Using the language of Creation doesn't mean that Isaiah is describing the very end of earth's history— creation language was also used in the description of the Exodus (Exod 14:21-22). In this case the language of creation describes what will take place after the exile to Babylon.

Daniel. You may be thinking, “OK. I see your point when it comes to Isaiah. But isn’t Revelation an apocalyptic book, more like Daniel? Surely in these types of books the prophet speaks directly about the future. He’s not speaking to his time and place but to our time and place. Shouldn’t we read those books differently than the other prophets?” A fair question. But a look at the evidence suggests that even in apocalyptic passages like Daniel 7 ***the language of the past is used to describe the future***. In Daniel’s vision the sequence of future kingdoms is described in the language of creation.

“Daniel said, ‘In my vision at night I looked, and there before me were the four winds of heaven churning up the great sea’” (Daniel 7:2). Does the language of the winds blowing over the sea sound familiar? We’ve seen similar language already in Genesis 1:2. The vision of Daniel 7 begins with an echo of the chaotic waters before creation. Then after Daniel’s description of a series of animals we come to a fascinating statement in verses 13-14:

“In my vision at night I looked, and there before me was one ***like a son of man***, coming with the clouds of heaven. He approached the Ancient of Days and was led into his presence. He was given authority, glory and sovereign power; ***all peoples, nations and men*** of every language worshiped him. ***His dominion is an everlasting dominion*** that will not pass away, and his kingdom is one that will never be destroyed.”

Daniel 7:13-14

The highlighted language reminds us of Adam’s dominion over the creatures of the earth (Gen 1:26-28). That dominion was exercised when he named the animals (Gen 2:19-20). So in Daniel 7, as in other Old Testament prophets, the language of creation is applied to the prophet’s future: winds churning on the sea, animals appearing, and a son of man (a second Adam) who is given dominion over these animals. So Daniel 7 describes the future history of

the world as a new creation of God. Once again *the language of the past is used to describe the future.*

What excites me about this reading of Daniel 7 is that this prophecy made perfect sense at the time Daniel was writing. God's people were right in the middle of the Exile at that time. Daniel and his people were captives in Babylon. How would Daniel view the animals in Daniel 7? They represented the nations who were oppressing the people of God. These nations are portrayed as vicious, ravenous beasts.

So what was the message of the vision to Daniel and his people? Something like this. "Just as Adam had dominion over the animals after creation, so the Son of man will have dominion over these nations that were oppressing you and your people." The message of Daniel 7, in other words, was that God was still in control. The world seemed out of control because wicked nations were doing evil things to the people of God. But God's people were not to be discouraged. God had not lost control of the situation, in spite of appearances.

Remember the principle that *God meets people where they are*? We see that very clearly in Daniel 7. God gives a message to Daniel about the future of the world. But His purpose was also to assure Daniel that He was in control of the present circumstances as well. In Daniel 2, Nebuchadnezzar, the king of Babylon, had a vision similar to Daniel's with a similar interpretation. But there was one major difference. In Nebuchadnezzar's dream, the nations of the world were symbolized by an idol. That makes sense because Nebuchadnezzar was a pagan king, to him the nations of the world were shining examples of the gods they worshiped. These nations were something to be excited about. But to Daniel these same nations were vicious,

ravenous beasts who were hurting his people. God gave the same message to each “prophet” in terms they would understand. ***When God reveals the future, He uses the language of the prophet’s past. God meets people where they are.*** We should not, therefore, expect point by point fulfillment of every detail, even in apocalyptic prophecy.

Further Examples of Prophetic Fulfillment

After the Return from Exile

What actually happened when Israel returned from Babylon? Compared to the texts we’ve been reading, the fulfillment was disappointing. Remember principle 2: ***God is not predictable.*** There were many residents of Israel and Judah who read the texts of Hosea, Micah, Isaiah, and others. I can imagine them making out charts to outline in advance just what God was going to do. But God’s work, when it came, wasn’t quite what the predictors expected.

On the twenty-first day of the seventh month,
the word of the LORD came through the prophet Haggai:

“Speak to Zerubbabel son of Shealtiel, governor of Judah,
to Joshua son of Jehozadak, the high priest,
and to the remnant of the people.

Ask them, ***‘Who of you is left who saw this house in its former glory?***

How does it look to you now?

Does it not seem to you like nothing?

But now be strong, O Zerubbabel,’
declares the LORD.

‘Be strong, O Joshua son of Jehozadak,
the high priest.

Be strong, all you people of the land,’
declares the LORD,

‘and work.

For I am with you,’

declares the LORD Almighty.
***'This is what I covenanted with you
when you came out of Egypt.***
And my Spirit remains among you. Do not fear.'
"This is what the LORD Almighty says:
'In a little while I will once more shake the heavens and the earth,
the sea and the dry land.
I will shake all nations,
and the desired of all nations will come,
and ***I will fill this house with glory,***'
says the LORD Almighty.
'The silver is mine and the gold is mine,'
declares the LORD Almighty.
***'The glory of this present house
will be greater than the glory of the former house,'***
says the LORD Almighty.
'And in this place I will grant peace,'
declares the LORD Almighty."
Hag 2:1-9 NIV

In this text the Lord notes the disappointment of the people as they view the fulfillment of the prophecies of return from exile. Yet He affirms that the fulfillment is nevertheless a true fulfillment. They were tempted to question the fulfillment. That's something to keep in mind as we approach unfulfilled prophecy— as we approach the book of Revelation. From Münster to Waco, people have tried to use the material in Revelation to gain a detailed "knowledge" of the future that God did not design for them to have. We all need to be reminded that ***the same God who is consistent is not predictable.***

As time went on it gradually became clear that God's mighty act in returning His people from the Babylonian Exile was not going to be the final event of earth's history. Attention more and more shifted to God's greatest act of all— the arrival of the Messiah. But that raises a fresh question. Many people assume that the messianic prophecies of the Old Testament have more

The Messiah would play the role that Zedekiah was supposed to play. He would be the One who perfectly carried out the righteousness of God. So the messianic prophecy of Jeremiah 23 uses the language of the past and the present to project an image of what Messiah would be like.

Let's go back to another prophecy in Isaiah:

“Again the LORD spoke to Ahaz, ‘Ask the LORD your God for a sign, whether in the deepest depths or in the highest heights.’ But Ahaz said, ‘I will not ask; I will not put the LORD to the test.’ Then Isaiah said, ‘Hear now, you house of David! Is it not enough to try the patience of men? Will you try the patience of my God also? Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign: ***The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel.*** He will eat curds and honey when he knows enough to reject the wrong and choose the right. ***But before the boy knows enough to reject the wrong and choose the right, the land of the two kings you dread will be laid waste.***”

Isaiah 7:10-16

This prophecy is talking about a king named Ahaz and a prophet named Isaiah. Ahaz is worried about two nations seeking to conquer his kingdom. Isaiah is offering him a sign from the Lord. God sends him a message that a young woman (Hebrew can be read either “a young woman” or “a virgin”) will conceive and have a child. The good news for Ahaz is that before the child is ready to eat solid food and before he knows right from wrong, the two nations will be destroyed. So this prophecy of the Messiah grows out of an immediate situation. God uses the language of the present to describe the future. In the time of the Messiah God will deliver His people just as Ahaz was delivered in Isaiah's day (Isa 9:1-7).

In Zechariah, a small book at the end of the Old Testament, we see the same principle operating again:

“Rejoice greatly, O Daughter of Zion!
Shout, Daughter of Jerusalem!
See, ***your king comes to you,***
righteous and having salvation,

***gentle and riding on a donkey,
on a colt, the foal of a donkey.***

I will take away the chariots from Ephraim
and the war-horses from Jerusalem,
and the battle bow will be broken.

He will proclaim peace to the nations.

***His rule will extend from sea to sea
and from the River to the ends of the earth."***

Zechariah 9:9-10

Here we see the language of Ephraim, Jerusalem, and the river Euphrates (just the River" in the text). In the language of the people's time and place there is also a description of the Messiah. But using texts like these, could anyone have predicted the exact course of Jesus' life? No. Should it surprise us that some understood these texts to predict that the Messiah to be a powerful king who would dominate the political forces in His world? Even Jesus' own disciples, after copious hints, failed to understand Jesus' Messiahship until Pentecost. Only after having known Jesus, walked with Him, and received God's interpretation through the Spirit, could the life of Jesus be seen as the fulfillment of these very prophecies.

The New Testament

This leads us to a seventh important principle of Bible prophecy, stated a couple of times by Jesus: "I have told you now before it happens, so that when it does happen you will believe." (John 14:29; cf. 13:19) Did Jesus say, "I'll tell you ahead of time so that you will know the future in advance? I'll help you make a chart where all the events are lined up so that you can spot your place in history at all times?"

No He did not. He **was** saying that if you pay careful attention to His words, you will recognize the time of fulfillment **when** it comes, not before. When the prophesied events

occur, you will recognize them and the fulfillment will be clear. It was clear that Jesus was the fulfillment of the messianic prophecies once His life was lived out. But the prophecies did not allow people to predict the exact course of His life in advance. **God is not predictable**. That means that **prophetic fulfillments are best recognized after they occur, not before**.

When it comes to unfulfilled prophecy, a little tentativeness is advisable. It was the lack of such tentativeness that led David Koresh to destruction. He thought he knew exactly what God wanted him to do and exactly how to bring about the result that God had in mind. But he was wrong. It is critical that we search the Word to gain an understanding of unfulfilled prophecy. At the same time we need to maintain a sanctified tentativeness about our conclusions. We must leave God the freedom to be God.

The book of Revelation continues the pattern we have seen all the way back to the book of Genesis. When John wrote the book the events described in it were almost entirely future. Yet the basic language of the book of Revelation is the language of John's past.

Revelation is filled with the Old Testament. For example, notice the latter part of Revelation 13:

“And he performed great and miraculous signs, even causing **fire to come down from heaven to earth** in full view of men. Because of the **signs** he was given power to do on behalf of the first beast, he **deceived** the inhabitants of the earth.”

Rev 13:13-14

At the time of the Exodus, Pharaoh's magicians deceived him by using magical arts. In Revelation 13 the magical art is to bring fire down from heaven to earth as Elijah did on Mount Carmel.

He ordered them to **set up an image** in honor of the beast who was wounded by the sword and yet lived. He was given power to give breath to the image of the first

beast, so that it could speak and **cause all who refused to worship the image to be killed.**

Rev 13:14-15

This is a reminder of Daniel 3 where Nebuchadnezzar set up an image and threatened to kill anyone who refused to bow down and worship it.

He also forced everyone small and great, rich and poor, free and slave, to receive a mark **on his right hand or on his forehead**, so that no one could buy or sell unless he had the mark, which is the name of the beast or the number of his name.

Rev 13:16-17

This phrase has a history too. In Deuteronomy 6, the Ten Commandments were to be worn on the forehead and the hand. So the mark is in some way a counterfeit of the Ten Commandments. In order to understand the mark of the beast, you have to understand the Old Testament background--the language of the past that John was using.

This calls for wisdom. If anyone has insight, let him calculate the number of the beast, for it is man's number. His number is 666.

Rev 13:18

The number 666 also has an Old Testament past. The image of Daniel 3 was 60 cubits high, 6 cubits wide and (presumably) 6 cubits deep--666. 666 is also the amount of income Solomon received in the year he turned away from the Lord (1 Kings 10:14). To the Hebrew mind set, the number 666 could be a pointer to the apostasy of Solomon, **the son of David.**

So when it comes to the book of Revelation we have to understand that **God meets people where they are.** He gives prophets lessons about the future **in the language of the past.** The book of Revelation, like other books of the Bible, comes in the language, culture, and historical setting of the inspired writer.

Ellen White

Finally, from an Adventist perspective, there is the example of Ellen G. White. Many Adventists have assumed that Ellen White's words were more directly chosen by God, that she saw clear pictures of actual events in her future. But even with Ellen White the descriptions of the future came in the language of her past. What was the language of her past? The English language of 19th Century America. God met her where she was and worked within that framework.

While Ellen White clearly addressed the future, you will not find a single statement in all of her writings that clearly describes anything that is unique to the 20th Century or beyond. You will look in vain for a description of computers, nuclear war, space travel, the internet, or any explicit description of the details of World War II in her writings. When she describes events that lie ahead of her times, she does so in language that is firmly rooted in her time and place. For example, when she describes the police forces of the world moving in to attack the saints at the very end of time, what weapons do those police carry in their hands? Swords! A description appropriate to the middle of the 19th Century, but no longer in today's world.

I was once challenged on this point. A person stood up and reminded me of Ellen White's comments regarding balls of fire falling on New York City at the end. He suggested that this could be a description of nuclear war in our future. I thought for a moment and then asked if he was familiar with the song, "And the rockets red glare, the bombs bursting in air, gave proof through the night that our flag was still there!" He indicated that he knew the American national anthem.

I asked him, "Do you know when that song was written?"

He thought for a moment, “1814?”

“Right,” I said, “Even the language of the fireballs, whatever that will mean when the time comes, is consistent with the language of Ellen White’s past.” So our knowledge of a more contemporary prophet confirms the evidence collected from our survey of fulfilled prophecies throughout the Bible.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I’d like to share a few practical cautions about prophetic interpretation:

1) I think Christians in general and Adventists in particular tend to be a little too certain that we understand exactly what God intends to do before He does it. Perhaps it arises out of the human temptation to play God, Who alone knows the future. But the history of people’s interpretations of Revelation ought to be a warning to us. Time and again, interpretations that made perfect sense at one point in time proved to be dead wrong when the actual fulfillment came. We should not expect point by point correspondence in all details between prophecy and fulfillment. Fulfillments are best recognized when they occur and not before.

2) The primary purpose of prophecy is not to satisfy our curiosity about the future, but to teach us how to live today. God uses a vision of the future to encourage and motivate real people in the real circumstances of everyday life. Although prophecy is predictive, its primary purpose is to teach us something about God and change the way we live long before the fulfillment comes.

3) We tend to read Revelation as though it was written to our own time, place and circumstances. We bring to our reading associations and concepts that would never have

occurred to John or His contemporaries. Such readings almost inevitably leads to a distortion of the text and of its original intention. The language of Revelation is the language of John's past not ours.

But if Revelation was written in the language of another time and place, it raises an important question. How can study of Revelation be relevant to us in our time and place when it was written for people in another time and place? How can we bridge the gap between their day and ours? How can we safely find a word from the Lord for today in the writings of those who lived and wrote in the distant past? We turn to these questions in the chapters to come.

Principles of Prophetic Interpretation

- 1) God is Consistent
- 2) God is Not Predictable
- 3) God is Creative
- 4) God Meets People Where They Are
- 5) There is a Spiritualization of the Type
- 6) God Uses the Language of the Past to Describe the Future
- 7) Prophetic Fulfillments are Best Recognized After They Occur

1. Translation and discussion in Hillel Schwartz, *Century's End: A Cultural History of the Fin de Siècle from the 1890s Through the 1990s* (New York: Doubleday, 1990).