

## **The Prophetic Pattern**

***The Prophetic Pattern***

What does prophecy mean?

by

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## DISCLAIMER

The views expressed in this book are solely the views of the author and based primarily on the author's scholarship. The views do not necessarily reflect the views of any religion or religious institution.

## DEDICATION

In grateful appreciation to all those who contributed indirectly to the information in this book through sharing or publishing information, or assistance with editing, without whom this book would not be possible. May the hills you climb become the measure of your rewards, and may all your dreams come true.

**- Scott -**



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# 1

## The Prophetic Pattern

### Summary

Are there different kinds of prophecy? Is one kind intended for one thing, while another kind is intended for something else? In this series, we will understand how to distinguish the intent of various types of prophecies, seers, and oracles.

The intent of the message of the Biblical prophet was to deliver a message from God. Yet prophets sometimes also became oracles, which had been forbidden.

### Discussion Guide

- Are there different kinds of prophecy?
- What is a prophet, a seer, an oracle?
- What was the mission (intent) of the Biblical prophet?
- Were Biblical prophets summoned for advice?
- What were the distinguishing characteristics of Biblical prophets?
- Are all other prophets erroneous or sons of the devil?



## **The prophetic pattern**

We live in a frighteningly awesome time. Glacier melting is occurring at the poles and Alps for the first time in 10,000 years. White fish are nearly gone from the North Atlantic, and those fish beds may never recover. The Earth's magnetic poles are undergoing more rapid changes than ever before. Technological progress has resulted in unimaginable destructive power, not only in the hands of powerful nations, but even in the hands of terrorists.

Terrified? We love to be terrified. People flock to horror movies simply to get scared. It raises our adrenaline and makes us feel alive. The feeling is short-lived, so we repeat the experience over and over again. At home we watch reruns of disaster movies and end of the world movies. We watch the end of the world prophecies of Nostradamus, the Bible, the Bible Code, the Mayans... in an endless variety of prophets who tell us the world will end in disaster. We love it.

As long as people love to watch disaster, others will dig up prophets who predict dire events to feed our hunger. Many will try to use prophecy to control our behavior. But is there actually something to prophecy?

I believe there is a very strong message at the heart of prophecy, and it is sealed in what I call the Prophetic Pattern. There is a difference between seeing the future to predict occurrences, and seeing conditions and foretelling what may result because of it. Predicting is a system of fear, while prophecy is a system of warnings - it is meant to apply the brakes before we kill ourselves.

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## **Seers versus prophets**

The early kings of Israel, and the kings of many other nations throughout history, had many predictors in their employ. These were seers, people who supposedly could see the future and predict the outcome of a war or other activity. Seers were common in the ancient world, just as they are today. But actual prophets tended to

be independent of the kings - in fact they often made prophecies that were at odds with the king.

Whether or not seers were actually accurate, they had profound influence over government leaders and in the lives of individuals. The Oracle at Delphi was a famous seer at Delphi in central Greece, who was renowned for her accuracy from prehistoric times until AD 395. Her source of information was the god Apollo. She was consulted in all important matters of state, such as governance and war, and was also consulted on personal matters. Her advice to the leaders of Sparta helped engender the first democracy.

The Oracle's pronouncements advised the notable lawgiver, Solon, who narrowed the difference between the haves and have not's, through instituting a written list of laws, trial by jury and a graduated tax system.

The famous philosopher Socrates attributed some of his notable sayings to the Oracle: "know thyself" and "nothing in excess," both of which were clearly evident in his own life as a man who considered issues deeply and who lived a life of moderation. Socrates didn't even drink alcoholic beverages, and others noted that he seemed to enjoy himself more than those who did imbibe.

Influence on civilizations like Sparta, and men like Solon and Socrates, means that the Oracle's influence came down through history in the important areas of democracy, law, and philosophy. Accuracy was very important to seers. They were judged by their accuracy. Perhaps this is why so many of their declarations were phrased in ambiguous statements that were left to the receiver to interpret.

Interpretation made all the difference in the world. In 560 BCE, Croesus, King of Lydia, asked the Oracle of Delphi, and another oracle, if he should attack Persia. Both oracles told him that if he attacked the Persians he would destroy a great empire. Lydia and Persia were both great empires. He misinterpreted the oracle's statement and was destroyed in battle, taking the empire with him.

This requirement of accuracy carried over to the prophets of Israel. But if prophets were judged on accuracy rather than their results on changing people's behavior, they would get an C instead of an A+. Prophets in the Bible were not so much to be consulted, but to deliver messages from God. Their mission was to change behavior, not bring disasters on people. But it often took the threat of disaster to get the people's attention.

It's an interesting phenomenon that Biblical prophets morphed from their primary mission of delivering messages from God about behavior (see the next heading), to delivering messages about the future, similar to other seers in the surrounding nations. Seeing the future was actually banned from earlier times by the Torah (the first five books of the Bible)?

Biblical prophets seemed to fall into a secondary mission: to give the people hope by predicting tragedy on their enemies who were attacking or suppressing them. They were often right, and sometimes wrong or partially right.

From this strange blend of prophecy about moral behavior, and predicting the future for hope, came a new type of prophetic tradition, apocalyptic. From the rich tradition of prophecy from prophets like Isaiah, came the apocalyptic literature of Daniel, and the Book of Revelation, which appeared from the 2nd. Century BC to 100 AD.

From studying prophets and their prophecies in the context of their local situations, we know that their predictive pronouncements were local. During perilous times, their predictions were couched in veiled language and symbols so that their enemies could not decipher what they were saying about them. This type of ambiguous language was no different than that delivered by other oracles. While early prophets spoke against foreign nations and invaders, later prophets who used veiled language, most often were talking about the Romans, who ruled their land during that time.



## **Who is a prophet, in Biblical terms?**

The word prophet in both Hebrew and Greek have “predicting” and “foretelling” in their root meanings, as well as simply “discourse” in Hebrew. Biblical prophets tended to have a pedigree. One of the first things I learned in college is that prophets were distinguished from other seers by important points, such as seeing a vision. In Numbers 12:6 (NIV) God said, "Listen to my words: ‘When a prophet of the LORD is among you, I reveal myself to him in visions, I speak to him in dreams.’”

Prophets brought a moral message that they attributed to God. (Moral means: How we should treat each other, and not mistreat each other.) The message always took the form, "Because you are doing this, that will happen to you." It was a cause and effect message regarding moral behavior. It said, "If you keep doing this, you are going to bring big trouble on yourself."

### **Prophecy ends until the Messiah?**

Prophecy in Ancient Israel was considered by the priests to have come to an end. The last prophet, Malachi, was active during the last part of rebuilding the Jewish Temple circa. 444 BCE. In fact, the religion fractured into many offshoots and no central prophetic figures appeared in the land until Christ, who the Jews tended to see as a prophet, as did Islam 600 years later.

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## **What is the message of prophecy?**

The role of prophecy was best illustrated by the prophet Jonah. God told Jonah to go and tell a city, Nineveh, that God would destroy it for its evil ways. But Jonah, a prophet to the King, had caught on to God's ways. Jonah knew that if the city changed its ways God would not destroy it. Public opinion held that a seer's predictive power was supposed to be absolutely right or the seer was

discredited. Jonah apparently didn't understand that he was not a seer, but an instrument of God... a prophet.

So rather than face the humiliation of being wrong, Jonah escaped to sea. But Jonah found at sea that running from your duties only brings greater trouble for everyone. A big storm arose and the sailors began to look for who in their midst might have brought this on them. They found Jonah and threw him overboard. Jonah was subsequently brought to shore by a "big fish." (As implausible as this sounds, stories are not uncommon of big fish assisting humans at sea.) So Jonah finally went to Nineveh and delivered the message. Of course the people changed their ways and the city wasn't destroyed. Jonah frumped under a tree and got over it.

The basics of prophecy and of God's messages are encompassed in this one little story. You can substitute any evil person, group, city, or nation for Nineveh. You can substitute any person, group, city, or nation for Jonah. You can substitute any evil in place of the evil. This pattern is what I call the prophetic pattern. Hitler and Mussolini (people that misdirected nations) are perfect examples of an evil that reached apocalyptic proportions but was countered by a group of vigilant nations which ultimately had to stop the cancer of hate and murder from growing.

God has established both the messengers and the means of stopping evil. Not that the opposing nations were holy or that this was a holy war - not any more than a snake or an earthquake is "holy." God can work through any means, including making dead bones rise and talk, or the jawbone of an ass, or a magazine, or Web site, or anything that can make people think - the communications device need not be set apart as dedicated to God. But to wear the badge of a prophet from God, the framework is clear.

In summary of the prophetic pattern, prophets received visions from God about immoral situations. They usually did not receive questions from other people. They said to people, if you don't change this behavior, that is what will happen. Prophecy was a warning about immoral behavior.



## **Real versus unreal prophets**

Holiness can be misleading. What I fear most is evil disguised as holiness. That is, individuals, groups, or nations that do evil while masquerading as agents of God. For example, small groups of terrorists in Palestine who continue one hate crime after another, drawing not just the region into conflict, but people from all over the world are drawn into it and finance it. Yet what the citizens of the country want most is peace. For Palestine, you can substitute Northern Ireland (which thank God is resolved), Lebanon, Bosnia, Afghanistan, Pakistan/India, Indonesia, Iran....

There have been real prophets down through history who followed the prophetic pattern, such as the Sisters of Fatima who saw visions of Mary, mother of Jesus, and delivered a message of warning about moral decay. But there are two other classes of people who have spiritual or forward looking talents, but who aren't prophets in the Biblical sense.

Mystics are people who enter an altered state through the use of meditation or drugs. Mystics gain insight while in this state. But studies of mystics indicate that they don't actually gain any "new" knowledge, they simply make the right mental connections while they are very focused so that they gain a deeper understanding of something. Mystics are not prophets or seers.

Seers and oracles are people who use some mechanism to gain foresight about the future. As already mentioned, the kings of Israel and other nations used them. Even Hitler and US Presidents are thought to have used them. Some use Tarot cards, some astrology, palm readings, signs in animal entrails, birds that appear, other natural signs and phenomenon, visions (which may be drug induced), or trance states. Seers generally use natural phenomenon.

Oracles generally use visions or trance states. Examples of these would be the Oracle of Delphi in Ancient Greece, or Nostradamus. The Oracle was thought to have been influenced by gasses present in a cave. Nostradamus used a crystal ball.

There is no moral imperative irreducibly connected with what these people see, although there may have been an indirect implication of moral behavior implied in the question or the answer. These people simply saw and foretold future events, or possible events, such as "If you attack you will destroy a great empire." That isn't to say that their "prophetic utterances" are invalid, it just means don't confuse these people with Biblical prophets or Biblical prophecy. The intent is different.

Edgar Cayce, "the sleeping prophet," stands supreme among oracles. A very religious Christian who spent his life helping people, he would go into a trance state and would answer any question given. He could diagnose illness, and sometimes relate that to the person's lifestyle or attitude. He could see items that neither he nor the questioner were aware of, at other locations, and discuss the nature of the universe, and reveal history. He could see future events, like World War II and the change of Russia from Communism back to Democracy.

Cayce's accuracy was considered very high. Despite his abilities and accuracy, Cayce was not a prophet in the Biblical sense, he was more properly called an oracle. He responded to questions that came from humans, not delivering unprompted messages from God. He was not carrying God's message, he was responding to what people wanted to know. He was not speaking specifically about morality. He was not giving a warning, although he sometimes couched his predictions in the sense of if things continue going as they are, this is what will happen.

The Mayan calendar is another instrument that is presented as predicting the end of the world. But does it really? Does that fit in with the intent of the calendar that we can deduce from its character? Probably not. The Mayan calendar is a cyclical calendar. It is based on the premise that certain epochs can be characterized by certain types of happenings, and these epochs occur over and over as each cycle repeats. The end of the world is outside of its character. What is in keeping with its character and intent is that when one cycle ends, another begins. The Mayan calendar is a

symbol of the cycles of the world. Turning it into a predictor of the end of the world would be a stretch.

When trying to understand prophecy, you first have to understand what the intent was in giving the prophecy. Similarly you have to understand what the intent is behind seers and calendars, and not lump them all together as having the same intent.

Biblical prophecy basically addressed local issues, not world issues, and were warnings from God that if people didn't change their behavior something bad was going to happen. Prophets warned communities, people in general, leaders, kings, and nations. The intent was to get them to change their behavior. We will see later that sometimes the intent was to give people hope when things looked hopeless.

We live in a frighteningly awesome time. Technological progress and the Internet communications revolution have turned the entire world upside down, but at same time technology has resulted in unimaginable destructive power, exacerbated global warming, made some species of birds extinct that once were plentiful....

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### **Are other prophets – seers and oracles – good or evil?**

There were many “prophets” circulating at the time of Christ who were preaching and healing much as Christ did. Many tried to emulate Christ. Christ was not against them, unless they were against him. (Whoever is for me is not against me.) The Bible doesn't try to warn us away from them, but gives us a way to test them.

During the First Century, there were groups among the Gnostics who taught that God had not become human in Jesus. This was considered a heresy and those who taught this were considered to be false prophets.

The primary role of the book of 1 John is to warn about false prophets and help people distinguish between true and false. The



secondary emphasis, and key to distinguishing between prophets, was to remind us that “God is love.”

### **Test the spirits**

1John 4:1-9 (NIV): “Dear friends, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world. <sup>2</sup>This is how you can recognize the Spirit of God: Every spirit that acknowledges that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God, <sup>3</sup>but every spirit that does not acknowledge Jesus is not from God. This is the spirit of the antichrist, which you have heard is coming and even now is already in the world.

“<sup>4</sup>You, dear children, are from God and have overcome them, because the one who is in you is greater than the one who is in the world. <sup>5</sup>They are from the world and therefore speak from the viewpoint of the world, and the world listens to them. <sup>6</sup>We are from God, and whoever knows God listens to us; but whoever is not from God does not listen to us. This is how we recognize the Spirit[b] of truth and the spirit of falsehood.

“<sup>7</sup>Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God. <sup>8</sup>Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love. <sup>9</sup>This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him.”

Those who are on the path of love, recognize truth. I think of it this way. When you hear things that are based in love, then you know that they are not from God and are not true. As the writer continues:

1 John 4:20-21 (NIV). “If anyone says, “I love God,” yet hates his brother, he is a liar. For anyone who does not love his brother, whom he has seen, cannot love God, whom he has not seen. <sup>21</sup>And he has given us this command: Whoever loves God must also love his brother.”

Discerning who is a prophet who we can listen to, and who is someone with an agenda that is against God, is not an easy issue. For example, Edgar Cayce was called a prophet, but was more properly an oracle. He was hesitant to use his gift, but eventually came to believe that it was from God. He was a Christian and Sunday School teacher who tried through his prophecies and actions (hospital) to help people.

We don't know the exact mechanism by which Cayce got his information. Was there a "spirit" who informed Cayce while he was in a trance? Possibly. But his daily trance experiences to help others were similar to near death experiences, and he was able to see any place on earth and history, including spiritual sources.

What we do know about Cayce was that he demonstrated through his work that he had love (concern, charity) for other people and reached out to help them. His information was helpful, not harmful, and impressed many physicians with the scope of the knowledge. Whatever information source he used, it also seemed to fit well with Cayce's religion and morality. When someone tried to misuse his gift for greed (such as predicting gambling related wins), he became ill and was not able to do it. Cayce could have used his gift for tremendous personal benefit, but he didn't, preferring to live a simpler life of duty and help to others.

Some of what Cayce said is controversial even today. Cayce did not deny that God was in Christ, upheld the belief, and expanded on it, explaining what most people believe today, that God is in each of us, and was most fully in Jesus, and Jesus is Christ. Cayce had phenomenal accuracy, but he was not infallible. His accuracy was considered to be over 80%. He expected people to "test" his suggestions, not accept them on blind faith. He believed that we could change the future that he saw. Was everything he said in a theological sense 100% correct? Each of us has to consider prophetic, spiritual, and other writings and discern what is true for ourselves. The key question is whether it is against God or love.

History tells us a great deal about blind faith in anything. People who believe that they have absolute knowledge have no such thing as faith. Faith is not blind, and does not follow blindly, it asks questions. It is discerning. I personally have seen too many people who believe they had some source of infallible knowledge and based their faith on that, who also seemed to hate most of the people in the world and showed no love for them.

People have been greatly misled by fraud in the past by people who claimed to speak to dead loved ones or to predict the future. Similarly there are those who won't do anything in this life without direction from astrology or tarot cards or psychics. (I like John Edward's approach of affirmation, not advice.) While I have to stop short of condemning such practices, I have to add that nothing is 100% accurate, and the future is in our hands and we are ultimately responsible for the choices we make.

I respect those individuals, Christian or Jewish, who take the first five books of the Bible quite literally, even if today they ignore the teaching to stone misbehaving children to death and don't take multiple wives or slaves. There is a place for literalism and fundamentalism – some need it. I also realize that at some point people tend to move from black and white positions to thinking more deeply about religious and spiritual issues, and the first five books of the Bible are read more for what they can teach us than for a list of rules to live by.

I don't think it was by accident that when the Israelites moved into a land where all kinds of psychics were very active, they were warned to depend on God for their information, and not believe everything they heard. I don't think it was any accident that the later prophets of Israel saw that lists of laws didn't work with people, and an age (covenant) of personal responsibility followed. I think we would be wise to heed that cautionary advice given to the early Israelites about prophecy: don't believe everything you hear.

As we'll see in the next chapters, prophecy morphed throughout history as needs demanded. By the end of the period of Israel's major prophets, prophecy was a blend of messages about

consequences for moral misconduct, and predictive messages about disasters to enemies and a better world to come, plus apocalyptic messages about larger than life enemies (the Romans), and the consequences were to happen “soon.”

Jesus changed prophecy again. He referenced the prophets and spoke with their language. Rather than condemning those who lived in immorality and causing a separation (as we’ll see in earlier biblical stories), he invited them to him and told them of the better life they could lead through better choices. He added healing to the repertoire of prophetic activities. Further, when Jesus’ followers reported that others were doing the same thing as him, he didn’t condemn them either.

As the Christian movement began to take hold under the Apostle’s guidance, the Apostles gained the gift of speaking in other languages, and suddenly many followers began to prophecy – so many that it caused confusion. These were not condemned. The Apostles simply said that as we began to see clearly, prophecy would cease.

1 Cor 13:8-10 (NIV). “Love never fails. But where there are prophecies, they will cease; where there are tongues, they will be stilled; where there is knowledge, it will pass away. <sup>9</sup>For we know in part and we prophesy in part, <sup>10</sup>but when perfection comes, the imperfect disappears.

Perfection is love. Maturity in love gives us clear sight. But who is mature in love? I’m not raising my hand. Prophecy seems to be linked to the needs of the times. If you’re inclined to listen to prophets, test the spirits – are they doing things out of love, or are they against God, or are they frauds motivated by greed or power.



# 2

## The Great and Terrible Day of the Lord

### Summary

The Bible often mentions, in many different phrases, a day of judgment, wrath, and destruction. One phrase became popular and rolled off the tongue: "The Day of the Lord." It was an oracle of doom against others, and was not specific in time.

The phrase was often spoken against Israel's enemies, and eventually served as the basis for a different type of imagery: apocalyptic. Neither served as immediate warnings to Israel's enemies, and were more typically messages of hope that God would punish the wicked, reward the good, and prevail in the end.

### Discussion guide

- What is meant by "The Day of the Lord?"
- Does God destroy the wicked?
- What does the wisdom literature, Ecclesiastes and Job, tell us about punishing the wicked?
- Are the Adam and Eve, and Noah stories examples to us?
- Did predictive prophecy against Israel's enemies always come true?
- Did the priests and kings of Israel obey the command not to do fortune telling?
- When was the Day of the Lord to come?
- Are we to hope for the Day of the Lord?

## **God of long-suffering mercy, or God of wrath and vengeance?**

Prophecies of doom have their theosophical (religious philosophy) roots in the "great flood" stories and Adam and Eve "beginning" stories that many ancient civilizations have. For example the Biblical Noah story was also known a thousand years earlier than Israel, in Ancient Sumer. In the interpretation of the Biblical Noah story of the flood, God found the people of earth to be violent beyond redeeming, and flooded the world to destroy them. This presented the foundational idea that God uses nature to punish people for their bad behavior.

This idea is reinforced by the earlier Adam and Eve and Cain and Able stories. In these other two stories we don't just see the punishing God, we also see the merciful and tolerant God who punishes but doesn't end life. Adam and Eve were told they would die, but were tossed out of the Garden and allowed to live their natural life spans. Cain was not killed for killing his brother, but was banished to the wilderness. There is mercy shown, and a clear separation from God caused by people's actions.

We have to ask whether it is people's choices and behavior that separates them from God, or is it God who punishes? Today we understand that separation from God is not what God intends for us. All through the Bible we are told about the tolerant and loving God who is merciful and forgives, bringing people back to Him who ask for forgiveness. In Jesus we see the immoral invited to him. He even ate with "sinners." In interpreting Biblical literature, we have to balance the ideas of when people are redeemable, and when they are not – not that we are to judge ourselves.

Destruction of civilizations because of bad behavior was a high profile idea in ancient lands. Something beyond themselves had to explain destruction - there had to be an explainable cause for such things. The destruction of the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah for "wickedness," or mistreating others, was a high profile example to others of what can happen when wickedness prevails. Fire and brimstone can rain down on you. We don't know what actually

happened to these cities, but archaeological evidence suggests they were destroyed by fire through some mechanism.

People today no longer interpret nature's violent activities as God's retribution. By observation, call it science, we see that nature does what nature does, both to good people and bad, and God has little or nothing to do with it.

There is a turning point in the Bible where the idea of a vengeful and warrior God gets raised and dismissed as an issue, and then thoroughly scrutinized later in the Wisdom literature. That turning point is when King David (1003 BCE) is not allowed to build the Temple that will represent God to man (1 Chronicles 22:7-9). David was a warrior king who made his name in battle - the wrong image. Instead David's son, Solomon, was allowed to build the Temple to represent a peaceful God.

Defending the kingdom was not a bad activity, but aggression against other nations was. As a punctuation point to the non-war, non-aggression nature of God, Israel's King Josiah was defeated in battle in 609 BCE. At that time Egypt and Assyria had a military alliance, and Egypt went to the aid of the Assyrians against Babylon. King Josiah seized the opportunity to become a great power and attacked Egypt at Megiddo in Judah (Northern Israel). King Josiah was mortally wounded and his army soundly defeated. (2 Chronicles 35:20-24.) Pride and overconfidence will only take you so far.

The Wisdom literature in the Bible challenges the assumption that God will destroy the wicked. Both the books of Job, and Ecclesiastes say, "Wait a minute - that isn't really true. In fact, good people suffer and bad people prosper." Job, who was a very good man who suffered one calamity after another, finally began to question God.

"Why me?" Job shouted, like we all do. His friends tried to put on him the conventional wisdom that God rewards those who follow His ways, and destroys those who are wicked. Therefore, Job must be wicked. Job challenged them, oh, yeah? The wicked see no



purpose in following God's ways. They do as they please and they prosper and live long lives. Punishment? We never get to see it.

Job 24:1 (NIV): "Why does the Almighty not set times for judgment? Why must those who know him look in vain for such days?" Those who are good often suffer and die for no purpose.

A younger man answered Job: Men in their pride think they can question God. God brings people to the edge of the precipice over and over so they will see the light of life. In the end of the book, God chastised the people who accused Job of suffering because he was being punished by God. He was not being punished.

### **Religious philosophy of God's inconsistency**

Some ask, "Is the story of Job consistent with the other picture of God in the Bible, the loving God? Would a loving God actually subject one of his loyal followers, or any person for that matter, to having his family and life destroyed just to make a point to Satan?"

We have to remember that the Bible was written by people who were "inspired" to write their reflections about God. Some would say that inspiration is a one way process: God speaks, people carve it in stone. But our and their walk with God is not a climb the mountain and talk to God type of journey. It's a daily process of gaining knowledge, experience, and integrating them into something called faith. Faith is not blind belief or choosing just what you want to see. The information in the Bible doesn't tell us what to believe - it offers the thoughts of others for our consideration.

What was happening in the wider Orient during and after the time of Job, which is actually a very old story, was a movement called "dualism." Dualism was not featured in Israelite religious knowledge, but rose to prominence in religious thought through Zoroastrianism. Dualism spoke of a war between the forces of good and evil in the spiritual world. The Book of Job reflects this "wisdom" as it took root in Israelite religious thought.

We don't know the origins of the story of Job. It may have migrated from Iraq, Iran, and Turkey. It reflects people's struggle to come to grips with prevalent ideas promoted by priests and other religious people, which didn't jive well with people's actual experience. In the Job story, God is the author of, or complicit in, pain.

It has to be left to the individual as to whether he believes the story of Job is true, or simply reflects a philosophical wrestling match between people's beliefs and reality. At minimum, we have to acknowledge that life happens to everyone, bringing both good and bad, and we can choose to find good in it, or simply suffer.

The writer of Ecclesiastes made similar observations that the wicked seem to prosper while good people suffer and die. What is the meaning of this? he asks. Are we but dust in the wind? No, there is a time for everything – life is full of experience. The prophet Jonah, who we have already looked at, confirms for us that the threats given to the wicked are meant to help us change for the good.

In contrast, in the ancient world, everything that happened could be given a religious interpretation. When people went into an event, such as a war, believing that they had the power of God behind them, they fought fearlessly as if they could not be defeated, and they usually won. The interpretation was, God had given them the victory. So we have a lot of war in the Bible, with people believing that God was the author of their enemy's destruction. People today have difficulty reconciling this "invasion, aggressive war, natural destruction" view of God with today's view of a more loving and nurturing God. Even by the time of King Solomon this was a questionable interpretation. Some even reject the entire Old Testament. Religious thought evolves as people become more refined in their thinking, interpretation, and religious writing. We err when we confuse self-serving religious interpretation with God.

What grew out of this thinking that God brought nature and people to destroy others who were evil, was the Day of the Lord imagery, that eventually grew into apocalyptic literature.

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## **The great and terrible day of the Lord**

Moses had instructed the people that prophets would speak to them after seeing a vision or a dream. The book of Deuteronomy, which supposedly was "discovered" after the people were drifting away from God, had a much stricter law code with much stricter terms and punishments than the other four books of the Torah: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, and Numbers.

### **History of the Book of Deuteronomy**

The book of Deuteronomy dates to the 7th Century BCE, around the time of King Josiah, unlike Genesis and Exodus whose document sources probably date to around 900 BCE (although they were likely rewritten), while Leviticus seems to be a document written by priests around 400 BCE, and its laws are not so strict.

King Josiah had seen the people slipping away from Yahweh toward other gods in the land. It is not considered part of the Torah by some. It carries much stricter requirements and punishments than the first four books of the Torah. It appears to be a reformist document used to bring religious discipline back to the people.

Various copies of the Torah were thought to have existed in some partial forms prior to their being brought into one document. Deuteronomy may have been compiled by priests to consolidate power at the Temple. Whether it was another copy of the earlier books that had once been used, or was simply something compiled for the occasion isn't know. Later reformists, the Sadducees, whose emphasis was on strict adherence to religious law, apparently added to it as they rebuilt the Temple after their return

from exile in Babylon.

King Josiah was the one who confidently rode out to destroy the Egyptians and was killed in battle and his army soundly defeated. The reforms worked for a while, as strict laws commonly do... for a while. But religious purity was never a high priority among the people of the land in Israel and Judah. The actual legitimacy and efficacy of Deuteronomy is questionable, but it is an important religious heritage document.

Moses instructed:

Deuteronomy 18:20-24 (NIV). "But a prophet who presumes to speak in my name anything I have not commanded him to say, or a prophet who speaks in the name of other gods, must be put to death." "21 You may say to yourselves, "How can we know when a message has not been spoken by the LORD ?" "22 If what a prophet proclaims in the name of the LORD does not take place or come true, that is a message the LORD has not spoken. That prophet has spoken presumptuously. Do not be afraid of him."

No wonder Jonah shook in his boots because he realized that if the people repented then God would not destroy them - the people would destroy him instead.

Moses also told the people to stay away from interpreting omens and divining the future.

Deuteronomy 18:9-14 (NIV). "When you enter the land the LORD your God is giving you, do not learn to imitate the detestable ways

of the nations there. <sup>10</sup> Let no one be found among you who sacrifices his son or daughter in the fire, who practices divination or sorcery, interprets omens, engages in witchcraft, <sup>11</sup> or casts spells, or who is a medium or spiritist or who consults the dead. <sup>12</sup> Anyone who does these things is detestable to the LORD, and because of these detestable practices the LORD your God will drive out those nations before you. <sup>13</sup> You must be blameless before the LORD your God.

The Israelites were also told:

Deuteronomy 8:19-20 (NIV) "<sup>19</sup> If you ever forget the LORD your God and follow other gods and worship and bow down to them, I testify against you today that you will surely be destroyed. <sup>20</sup> Like the nations the LORD destroyed before you [in your path], so you will be destroyed for not obeying the LORD your God."

The Israelites were also warned about a “day of disaster,” which is one of the first of the Day of the Lord sayings. Moses encouraged the Israelites to stay firmly committed to God, and not be like those who surround them, who mistake outward beauty for inward beauty, worship other gods, and who don't recognize that God has created all. Those he will destroy.

Deut. 32: 34-43 (NIV). "It is mine to avenge; I will repay. In due time their foot will slip; **their day of disaster is near and their doom rushes upon them.**' ... <sup>41</sup> 'when I sharpen my flashing sword and my hand grasps it in judgment, I will take vengeance on my adversaries and repay those who hate me.' ... <sup>43</sup> Rejoice, O nations, with his people, for he will avenge the blood of his servants; he will take vengeance on his enemies and make atonement for his

land and people."

One theme runs through all of this type of predictive statements: the terrible end is near. The power of the statement is in both the immediacy and the terribleness.

### **Suffering**

We generally understand today that it is at our own hands that we suffer for our wrongs. Suffering is one way that we learn, and it is great motivation.

While many seem to be without conscience, and remain happy, for the rest of us our messed up thinking that mistreating others is OK limits our wisdom and understanding, and therefore our gain from this life. Those who do have a conscience suffer from the pain they have caused and become wiser for it.

It is by our own hands that we learn from life. It is also God's design that life brings problems to us that help us see the light of life. As the book of Job says, it is God who brings us to the edge of the precipice.

It is very difficult to look at our suffering and discern that indeed it was God who brought this suffering to us. All we can say is, "Perhaps."

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### **Prophecies or oracles?**

We have the foundational thinking from the Book of Genesis (Adam and Eve, and Noah stories) that God destroys the wicked through nature. Moses firmly established the pattern of stern warnings. Do this or you will die... soon. Don't do that or you will

die... soon. The prophets continued the warnings: stop doing evil or you will be destroyed... soon.

So we have the prophetic message that was intended to get the people to change from their wrongdoings and turn back to God. We also have predictive oracles about other nations, and this is where it gets confusing. The first oracle giver in the Bible shows up in Numbers 22.

Balaam, a Mesopotamian diviner or oracle, was called on to see if the Israelites who were entering the land could be defeated. He consulted God, we can infer he did so in a dream, and he was told not to bother them. He would have created an enchantment (spell), or divined (learned through some mechanism such as omens) their fate, but nothing worked against them. So Balaam gave the king who consulted him an oracle, which told of all the misfortune that God would do to his people in coming years.

So now we have a clearer view of two types of foreseeers of the future in the Bible. Oracles used various mechanisms to see and predict events in the future, and they often were religious people who felt they were directed in their sight by God. They were consulted by other people - they didn't go around offering advice - and were paid for their services.

Oracles commonly were in the service of kings, and the Biblical kings did use them, even though Moses had forbidden such activity. Prophets, on the other hand, had a clear mandate to deliver messages delivered through dreams and visions, from God to people and kings, unbidden, that were about their immoral behavior. They foresaw destruction if people didn't change. Their proclamations were usually if... then.... If you don't change, then you will be destroyed.

It gets even more confusing. The prophets began to make proclamations against other nations, similar to the other oracles.

They said against Israel's enemies, "God is going to make you suffer and destroy you." Sometimes these prophets may have been visiting in Egypt or Babylon and so speaking directly to Israel's enemies. Most of the time they were in Israel, speaking to Jews. Why speak oracles against the enemies of the Jews, to the Jews?

In evaluating Biblical prophetic literature, it helps to understand the intent, and whether the message was a prophecy, a further development of prophecy, or was from an oracle. How do we understand the contrast here?

On the one hand we have the Day of the Lord judgment God who sends prophets to proclaim doom, and their word must be absolutely true, and who will take vengeance on the wicked.

On the other hand we have the God of peace who sends prophets to deliver a message of doom to get people to change, and then he doesn't destroy the wicked, even if they remain wicked.

On our third hand we have the God who predicts to the Jews that he will destroy their enemies. Is all of this a natural evolution of religious thought? Or is God simply capricious and will one day love you and the next day kill you? The two conflicting images of God presented in the Old Testament have puzzled people for thousands of years. We will try to sort it out.

The Prophet Isaiah was very concerned with social justice (how we treat each other). His prophecy begins with a vision in which he says in short that the people rebel against God and they mistreat others. God is tired of them showing up at the Temple with their sacrifices and having all their feasts in His name. He wants them instead to stop their evil and learn to do good, seek justice, correct oppression, defend the fatherless, and plead for the widow. Most of Isaiah's prophecy is filled with these ideas.



Isaiah was the first to use the exact language, "Day of the Lord," although similar ideas and phrases occur much earlier. The exact phrase is used around 26 times in the Bible. Isaiah didn't use it in prophecy to the Israelites about their behavior. He used it in a predictive oracle in Isaiah chapter 13. The oracle was a message of doom for the country that had annexed the Northern kingdom of Israel: their arch-enemy Babylon.

Isaiah 13:6 (NIV) "Wail, for **the day of the LORD** is near; it will come like destruction from the Almighty."

In Isaiah 13, Isaiah delivers this condemnation of Babylon, saying, the people will tremble in their boots from fear. Verse 9 (NIV): "See, the **day of the LORD** is coming — a cruel day, with wrath and fierce anger — to make the land desolate and destroy the sinners within it." He will make the heavens tremble and the earth shake out of its place. They will be killed by the sword, their infants mauled before their eyes, and their wives ravished." Nasty stuff. We learn how this is to be done in verse 17: the Medes will invade them. And in the last verse 22, we learn that "...Her time is at hand, and her days will not be prolonged."

So we have an oracle that is very specific about who this will happen to, how it will happen, and that it will happen soon. The language is filled with colorful pictures of fear and terrible destruction. Can we give the same credibility to the oracles of prophets as to their other messages? Did this actually happen? Yes, Isaiah possibly saw the beginning of this 2 years before his death in 687 BCE, and it was completed 62 years after Isaiah, as shown in two sources:

### **Vengeance on Babylon**

"In 625 Nabopolassar, a Chaldean, established a new dynasty in

Babylon (it is variously described by historians as Chaldean or Neo-Babylonian). Nabopolassar attacked Assyria, allying himself with the Medes - eastern neighbours of Assyria, and technically one of their vassal states. In 612 Nineveh was captured and destroyed after a three-month siege. This brought to an abrupt end the story of Assyria. It would be absorbed, eventually, in the Persian empire.

- Read more at:

<http://www.historyworld.net/wrldhis/PlainTextHistories.asp?historyid=aa10#ixzz0bDwPWNNV>

"During the reign of Sennacherib of Assyria, Babylonia was in a constant state of revolt, led by Mushezib-Marduk, and suppressed only by the complete destruction of the city of Babylon. In 689 BC, its walls, temples and palaces were razed, and the rubble was thrown into the Arakhtu, the sea bordering the earlier Babylon on the South. This act shocked the religious conscience of Mesopotamia; the subsequent murder of Sennacherib was held to be in expiation of it, and his successor Esarhaddon hastened to rebuild the old city, to receive there his crown, and make it his residence during part of the year. On his death, Babylonia was left to be governed by his elder son Shamash-shum-ukin, who eventually headed a revolt in 652 BC against his brother in Nineveh, Assurbanipal.

Once again, Babylon was besieged by the Assyrians and starved into surrender. Assurbanipal purified the city and celebrated a "service of reconciliation", but did not venture to "take the hands" of Bel. In the subsequent overthrow of the Assyrian Empire, the Babylonians saw another example of divine vengeance. (Albert Houtum-Schindler, "Babylon," Encyclopaedia Britannica, 11th ed.)

Under Nabopolassar, Babylon threw off the Assyrian rule in 612 BC and became the capital of the Neo-Babylonian Chaldean Empire."

- <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Babylon>

The Prophet Jeremiah was active from 627 BCE to sometime after 580 BCE. Like Isaiah before him, he brought prophetic messages to the people from God about the way they treated each other. He also spoke predictive oracles against other nations. In chapter 46 of Jeremiah, he mentions the Day of the Lord with reference to Egypt. Egypt and Babylon had been battling each other for supremacy and real estate in the area. Israel was sandwiched between these behemoths. Jeremiah said that Egypt, like the Nile, was attempting to rise and cover the entire world, destroying civilization as it went. Memphis (in Egypt) would be destroyed and Egyptians would go into exile.

Jeremiah 46:10 (NIV) "But that day belongs to the LORD [RSV: the Day of the Lord], the Lord Almighty — a day of vengeance, for vengeance on his foes. The sword will devour till it is satisfied, till it has quenched its thirst with blood. For the Lord, the LORD Almighty, will offer sacrifice in the land of the north by the River Euphrates."

Did it happen? By 601 BCE, Nebuchadnezzar and Neco fought to a stalemate at the Egyptian border (in Israel):

"The Egyptians met the full might of the Babylonian army led by Nebuchadnezzar II at Carchemish where the combined Egyptian and Assyrian forces were soundly destroyed by the Babylonians and the Assyrian Empire collapsed. Assyria ceased to exist as an independent power. Egypt retreated and was no longer a significant force in the Ancient Near East. Babylon controlled the territory up to the Wadi of Egypt and the Pharaoh no longer left Egypt to exert any influence in the affairs of the region[1]."  
- [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Battle\\_of\\_Carchemish](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Battle_of_Carchemish)

As far as we know, Memphis was not destroyed and people in Egypt were not taken into exile as slaves (although captured soldiers and those who travelled with the army may have been). Memphis was significantly far enough into central Egypt to indicate conquering the land. This didn't happen. Egypt lost the war, was embarrassed and lost power. (Note that scholars disagree about another invasion from Babylon in 565 that may have been more destructive and pervasive, or might not have happened at all, but this is an earlier time.)

The second "Day of the Lord" oracle delivered by a Biblical prophet was about 50% accurate. Was Jeremiah not a prophet to be believed?

The statements in chapter 48, against Moab, appear to be statements about what had happened recently in Jeremiah's time, with vengeful celebration at the plight of Nebo and coming additional destruction.

Prophecy is not perfect. It does not offer perfect sight into the future. Why do I say that?

1 Corinthians 8-10 (NIV): "Love never fails. But where there are prophecies, they will cease; where there are tongues, they will be stilled; where there is knowledge, it will pass away. <sup>9</sup> For we know in part and we prophesy in part, <sup>10</sup> but when perfection comes, the imperfect disappears."

Generally oracles didn't carry the weight or accuracy of prophecy. Kings had groups of seers from whom they would seek knowledge of the future. One oracle might be wrong. Perhaps oracles had more weight when proclaimed by actual prophets.

Jeremiah could have spoken oracles about any enemy in the Middle East and it would likely have come true sooner or later, and the oracles never had a date attached. Babylon and Egypt got banged up more often than a car in a demolition derby. The countries at that time were always at war and always conquering each other as rulers

conquered other areas, consolidated territory, shared power with family members, murdered each other, and gained power.

Most of the oracles are about countries that were Israel/Judah's enemies, and their destruction in the near future. Some predictive oracles appear to be gloating about destruction of enemies that has occurred, offering a moral lesson and a lesson about God's power and favor, or they offered hope about the future destruction of Israel/Judah's enemies.

We don't even know for sure that Isaiah's and Jeremiah's oracles were even spoken before the events, although we assume they were. They were not predictive of Israel's success over its enemies, and they probably did not provide any type of warning for their enemies. Unlike prophecy, even though Jeremiah was probably in Egypt for a time, they weren't warnings that were intended to get people to change, they were just messages of hope. It is important to note the context and what the intent of these oracles was: lessons (affirming God's power) and hope.

Predictive oracles serve three purposes: 1) They warn of destruction for wickedness 2) They affirm the power of God over evil, and 3) they offer hope. These threats of destruction are counterbalanced by a tolerant and long suffering God of peace who wants the best for people and who doesn't destroy. For example, Abraham tried to intervene for Sodom and Gomorrah, and the Lord acknowledged that if there were only a few good people, the entire civilization would not be destroyed. God is tolerant and merciful. Destruction is not the intent of predictive oracles. Hope is the intent.

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### **Hope run amuck**

After Isaiah and Jeremiah, we have the Prophet Amos, who apparently had heard people calling too much for the Day of the Lord, while they continued with injustice and mistreatment of others. Amos said to them, "Woe to you who long for the day of the LORD!" It would be a terrible time for them.

Amos 5:18-20 (NIV) "Woe to you who long for the day of the LORD! Why do you long for the day of the LORD? That day will be darkness, not light. <sup>19</sup> It will be as though a man fled from a lion only to meet a bear, as though he entered his house and rested his hand on the wall only to have a snake bite him. <sup>20</sup> Will not the day of the LORD be darkness, not light — pitch-dark, without a ray of brightness?"

Amazingly today we have people hoping for the Apocalypse and the return of Christ. Why? For some, similar to the Sadducees, it is much more important what you believe than how you treat others. They prefer to see the world destroyed, and of course get their reward. They have substituted stale facts for the power of the Good News.

The oracles delivered by the prophets Isaiah and Jeremiah raise troubling questions. First, why are they doing something that Moses specifically prohibited - that is, fortune telling? Second, why were they reveling in God's vengeance on people? There is a mismatch in this time between what came earlier (Moses condemnation of oracles) and what came later: apocalyptic literature.

We have to question whether it was the influence of the kings and the priests that subtly influenced prophets to begin speaking these poetic oracles against Israel's enemies. The priests used the urim and thummim to determine the will of God. These are widely regarded to have been somewhat like throwing the dice or flipping a coin. They were elements of chance, which fell under Moses ban on divination.

The kings maintained groups of seers to see future events for them, which fell under Moses ban on seers. All around them in the land, people interpreted omens and used other types of divination to foresee the future. Were the prophets regarded as incompetent if they couldn't do such things? Obviously accuracy was not found in just one seer.

Perhaps the poetic voice that these oracles were delivered in is a clue. The word prophet also has as its root in Hebrew, singing. People remember poetry, particularly when it is poignant to their situation. Were these oracles actually songs or verses of hope that the people sang or chanted or remembered when they feared for their future? The intent of predictive oracles was hope.

During a time when the people of Judah had been subjugated by Babylon and many dragged into exile as slaves, or were used to disperse and mingle the population to dilute culture, at a time when major powers all around them fought with each other with no indication which power would occupy them next, the oracles offered hope: God would protect them, favor them, and destroy their enemies... soon.

Apocalyptic literature grew out of the Day of the Lord imagery and the oracle statements. But the Day of the Lord imagery continued right through the time of Christ.

# 3

## The Apocalypse

What does "shaking in our boots" prophecy mean?

### Summary

All prophecy, including apocalyptic, is local in time and place. The intent of predictive prophecy is hope for the local people. The prophets, including Jesus the Christ, all talked about events happening "soon," even if they were cosmological in scope. In studying prophecy in depth, we need to understand what the local situation was, how heavily it was veiled in symbolism or abstract language, and what fulfilled these events.

Apocalyptic prophecies are also timeless. They show us patterns about people, situations, and events that are likely to recur throughout history. To guard against them, all we have to do is watch for the patterns.

### Discussion Guide

- What does the word "apocalypse" mean?
- What was the "abomination of desolation" Daniel referred to?
- What was the "abomination of desolation" that Jesus referred to?
- Where is the Temple of God today?
- What was the Sadducee emphasis?
- How did Jesus raise the Temple in 3 days?
- What does the word "revelation" mean?



- What do both Daniel and Jesus indicate as the sign that the end is near?

## **The Apocalypse**

The word apocalypse is not from the Bible. It's just a word that describes a certain type of literature, such as "wisdom literature." The Book of Daniel is the first book of prophecy that we consider "apocalyptic," or dealing with end times, although God's role in the beginning and end of humanity (eschatology) is foreshadowed in earlier books like Isaiah.

We learn something very important about predictive oracles from the Book of Daniel. That is, prophecy may be local (involving local times and conditions), but it can be extrapolated to other times. Basically the events predicted in the Book of Daniel came true, we know from history. In the last chapter, 12, Daniel describes a day of judgment and deliverance for the dead and alive. It will come when the power of the faithful is worn out. It was local in intent in that the Temple functions would be stopped and an abomination that desolates the Temple would be set up.

What was the abomination that was so devastating? The Seleucids, who conquered the country, branded the Temple as their own, and began doing sacrifices in the Temple. The abomination whose result is desolation of the Temple in Daniel's time was done by Seleucid King Antiochus IV Epiphanes. The name Epiphanes meant "the god manifest," that is, the presence of god in person. Antiochus was thought by his peers to be the visible manifestation of Zeus, the god of the Greeks. He is the "contemptible person" spoken of in Daniel 11:21.

Ultimately Antiochus probably set up an altar to Zeus in the Temple, an abomination, and he outlawed Judaism and destroyed copies of the Torah. His actions caused desolation of the Jewish Temple and religion. Yet he originally seemed peaceful in purpose. Antiochus foreshadowed Nero, who persecuted the Christians. Both

of these men are a pattern that warns of the types of people to watch out for: anti-God, anti-Christ.

Eventually the Temple was given back to the Jews and they rebuilt. But Daniel's prophecy seemed to have implications beyond just the local situation and events. Jesus also referred to the coming desolation and abomination described by Daniel, in Matthew 24. In Matthew 23 and 24, Jesus described the house of those who turned away from God (rejected Jesus teachings) as "desolate" and said that every stone in the Temple would be thrown down. Hadn't desolation and destruction already happen? Yes. But it was to happen again. In AD 70, The Romans again destroyed the Temple.

The patterns are there for us to watch out for. Pattern 1: Leaders like Antiochus come proclaiming peace, but their idea of peace is destruction. Pattern 2: The people of God reject the path that is the way of God. Both are abominations. There is desolation of the heart and the Temple.

### **God's presence is symbolized by Temples of stone and Temples of flesh**

In ancient Judaism and the ancient world, God was symbolically found in a place. Often it was a place where people once had a mystical experience and erected an altar to God. From the time of King Solomon on, the Temple in Jerusalem became that place. It was thought to be the place where Abraham was asked to sacrifice his son. The Temple became a large symbol of God and the Jewish religion.

The Temple could not be a symbol of God, yet also be a symbol of injustice and evil in people's hearts. When people's behavior toward their fellow people became devoid of justice and kindness, God left the building. What we can take from this and look for, is that when people are predominantly evil, the Spirit of God is not in them, so not in the world. Then the end of something is near.

**Misuse of the building**

As God was near to leaving the building, the Prophet Jeremiah met the people at the Temple gate with this stern message. "Do not trust in these deceptive words: 'this is the Temple of the Lord, the Temple of the Lord, the Temple of the Lord.'" Would they (paraphrased) steal, murder, commit adultery, swear falsely, and worship other gods, and then come and stand before God in his house and say "we are delivered" only to go on doing these abominations? "Has my house become a den of robbers?" - Jeremiah 7: 1-5.

They had hardened their hearts with evil deeds, and so were blind to God in the Temple. Babylon attacked and destroyed the Temple. Abominations by the people, reflecting the desolation in their hearts, resulted in desolation of their Temple.

The old covenant (an agreement with rules and conditions that defines a relationship) given by Moses was broken, and the Temple was destroyed. There would now be a new covenant, according to Isaiah, and the Temple would be rebuilt. The new covenant between God and people would be with the individual, universal to all. (See Isaiah 56:1-7). In Christian terms, the people became the Temple. Everyone was accepted. The spirit of God would be in His followers.

### **A short history of Temple destruction**

The Persian King allowed Ezra and Nehemiah to return and rebuild the Temple. By 170 BCE the political situation had changed as the Seleucids rose in power, and the Seleucids were determined to spread their Greek culture throughout the region.

In 169 BCE, King Antiochus, ruler of Judea, plundered the Temple and destroyed copies of the Torah.

The Maccabees revolted, recaptured Jerusalem, and cleansed the Temple in 164 BCE, and the Jews regained religious autonomy for a while. They then battled for political independence from the

Seleucids. The Roman High Senate gave them religious independence in 129 BCE.

In 63 BCE, around 59 years before Christ's birth, there was a struggle for power between the Maccabeus brothers. Rome interfered, conquered the area, and entered the Temple.

The Jews hated the Romans and the area remained in conflict. In 70 AD the Romans destroyed the Temple. It has not been rebuilt, and a Moslem Mosque stands on the site.

Prophets didn't carry the same authority as the Law contained in the first five books of the Bible (Torah). It was not the role of the prophets to create religious law, but to deliver messages from God.

Would the Jews open the religion to others as the Prophet Isaiah foresaw? No. On the contrary, those who rebuilt the Temple felt compelled to enforce the rigid rules found in the book of Deuteronomy - rules they believed they broke and for which they were punished with captivity in another land. They understandably enforced these rules with much greater determination and rigidity, but did they miss the point. It was not broken rules that were the problem, it was what was in their hearts that was the real problem. These were the Sadducees who believed it was important to follow the rules of God, but it was not important how people treated each other.

By the time of Christ, the Jewish religion was very split. For some, rules reigned supreme over any other consideration. Many had become as heartless as an uncaring bureaucracy.

The Sadducee sect was the priesthood of the time. Their reign in Jewish religious philosophy and leadership resulted in the desecration done by Antiochus. Unlike the prophets, the Sadducees didn't care much about evil in people - they simply believed that God wanted them to follow certain rules, and their behavior - good or evil - was irrelevant to God.

As representatives of the priestly class, the Sadducees were the ones sent back to rebuild the Temple during Ezra's time. Their philosophy didn't change, and they became even stricter about following rules. By the time of Christ, they were still the priestly class in the Temple, and they would argue about such things as whether it was legal on the Sabbath to rescue a person who was drowning - that would be considered work. It was these people who Jesus spoke against. After the destruction of Temple in 70 AD, the sect faded from history. See Sadducees on Wikipdia.com.

Christ said of the Temple in his day, "Destroy this Temple, and in 3 days I will raise it up." (John 2:19.) He referred to himself as the Temple, and he would rise 3 days after being crucified.

The new Temple is interesting in its implications. Ezekiel described it in Ezekiel chapters 40--48. He saw flowing from the Temple a river that grew wider as it went farther from the Temple. It nourished the lush vegetation growing on its banks. Christ provided a similar description. He said:

John 7: 38-39 (NIV), "Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, streams of living water will flow from within him.'<sup>39</sup> By this he meant the Spirit, whom those who believed in him were later to receive. Up to that time the Spirit had not been given, since Jesus had not yet been glorified."

The words and patterns of Ezekiel and Christ are in harmony. Christians represent Christ's body on earth. All of God's followers have the spirit of God within them, and represent the Temple of God. The love of God is in their hearts, and they give that love to others. They are rivers of living water that nourish others in an ever-widening stream.

In the Book of Acts (Acts 7:49), when people were about to stone Steven to death, he quoted Isaiah 66:12 (NIV) to them: "Heaven is my throne, and the earth is my footstool. What kind of house will

you build for me? says the Lord. Or where will my resting place be?"

God can't be contained in any Temple building. He can't be found in any place but the heart. But His spirit is found in his followers, who reveal God through the good things that they do. It is when his followers are exhausted from the wickedness around them that His spirit will not be present here, and the end will come.



## **The revealing**

Daniel foretold that a day of judgment, and deliverance for the dead and alive would come when the power of the faithful was worn out. Jesus also describes a time of darkness both in men's hearts and in the conflict that comes from them, when most men's love will grow cold. In that day, few people are good people - most are wicked. And as the floods came without warning and consumed those in Noah's day, so will the end come quickly. But when is not to be measured in days and years. Not even Jesus the Christ knew. "When" is a time for God to decide. (Matthew 24.)

The Book of Revelations, the "revealing," was intended to be local in time and place, yet it revealed a pattern for which we should watch. In chapter 6, the six horsemen come one at a time. One takes peace from the earth. This might be the time spoken of by both Daniel and Christ when the power of the faithful is worn out, the love of God is no longer in people's hearts, so the spirit of peace, the spirit of God, is no longer in the world.

By the sixth horseman, every person great or powerless goes into hiding to hide from the day of wrath. Then we get the message of hope. The wicked are punished, the good are saved and rewarded, wickedness (Satan) is banished forever, and there is a new earth. The book was written in veiled symbols about the Roman persecution of the Christians. It was a message of hope to them. It was a message about enduring difficult times and even persecution. Christ is coming for them soon.

There is a pattern. For religious people, history tends to repeat itself over and over again. The pattern is: growing wickedness among the leaders and the people, and growing intolerance of religion. People are persecuted. Peace leaves the scene. There is war. Eventually God prevails over the wicked and religious freedom returns.

This pattern has happened repeatedly to the Jews in Europe and the Middle East. It has happened to Christians in Europe, England, the Middle East, and Northern Africa. It has happened to Muslims in various parts of the world, but especially in the Christian/Muslim wars in Turkey (Ottoman Empire) and Southern Europe. It has happened to Hindus in various parts of the world. It has happened to Buddhists in various parts of the world.

There have been many genocides that killed hundreds of thousands, or even a million, but Hitler was the worst aggressor of all in numbers of innocents killed: six million Jews, plus many gypsies and others. Hitler's actions have often been rivaled by other leaders past and present who destroy populations because of their religious or ethnic background. There is a pattern if we will watch for it. See: Ethnic Cleansing on Wikipedia.org.

## **Patterns and intent**

Do we have the keys to interpret prophetic messages, predictive oracles of doom and hope, and apocalyptic messages?

Prophetic messages, those that give a moral warning of doom because of people's wickedness, are not predictive oracles. They are warnings about what can happen if people allow themselves to mistreat others. They are local in time and place, and as in Jonah's prophecy will come true in "44 days." But God is merciful and doesn't destroy.

Predictive oracles are messages of warning and hope, and they are primarily local in time and place, intended to happen soon or in the near future.

Apocalyptic messages are local and soon, yet timeless because they give us patterns to watch for.

Prophetic messages and predictive oracles can be seen as patterns to watch for in the future. Prophetic messages are sometimes mixed in with predictive oracles of hope, so they are confusing. They can be applied to any time and any people. They follow the prophetic pattern: Warning, If you do this, that will happen. Predictive oracles offer hope: In the end, the bad people will get their reward, and the good people will prevail and get their reward.

You can easily get lost in all of the small details presented in prophetic and apocalyptic literature. If what you want to believe is that God is vengeful, people are predominantly evil and the world is lost, and God's destructive power is the most effective use of God's force in the world, then you can build a case for it. You can stack Biblical verses up and interpret them in any way to fit your scheme of things. But I question if those "the world is lost" schemes reflect a loving God that compels us into action, who most of us know.

What is really important is the intent of the literature and the character of God that we have been shown. In the final analysis, it is doubtful that God ever uses natural disasters to punish people in any way. Punishing the wicked is simply an interpretation - an object lesson about what may ultimately happen to people who don't watch their ways. Why put it in this way? It's simpler than what we think. People in the ancient Middle East had few beliefs about anything beyond the grave - life ended there, or there was some mythology about a gray place in the underworld where people went.

The Jews did not have a formal theology on an afterlife, but popular opinion was undoubtedly influenced by the Greeks and others. For the Jew, there was no eternal life and no ultimate punishment or reward. The Sadducees (priestly sect) took no firm stand against evil. If punishment or reward was to happen, then it must happen quickly in this life. The immediacy of punishment seemed more real. Belief in a vengeful God who acts through nature was both natural and effective.

We know now, told to us by people in the Bible and by our own observations, that nature does what it does to both the good and the wicked. Attributing natural events to God's actions says what some



ancient people believed about God, but in the same Bible, people question that premise and rule out that God's vengeance happens in this world.

Apocalyptic messages grew out of the rich background of prophetic messages and predictive oracles of hope. They are local and soon, yet timeless. They happened, and there is no certain time that an event will again take place. These prophecies are rich in symbolism and patterns that can be interpreted for any time and place. They tell us, if people become predominantly evil, they will be destroyed. They tell us about dire consequences for those who do evil, and about rewards for those who stay strong and are good. They are warnings, mixed with messages of hope.

When will the end come? Like Job, we ask, "Why does the Almighty not set times for judgment? Why must those who know him look in vain for such days?" Over and over in the Bible we see that God does not destroy people who are good nor civilizations that can be redeemed. He is merciful. He forgives. We are told that Noah's civilization was destroyed for pervasive violence. Sodom and Gomorrah were destroyed for pervasive "wickedness," or mistreating others (literally had nothing to do with homosexuality). To know the time of destruction, we can only look for signs.

The world is always preoccupied with signs and omens such as calendars and interpretations of specific dates, and natural signs such as earthquakes. Jesus was asked about signs in his time. "He answered, "A wicked and adulterous generation asks for a miraculous sign! But none will be given it except the sign of the prophet Jonah."

Interesting that Jesus should refer to Jonah. He meant literally that as Jonah was in the belly of the fish for 3 days, so would Jesus rise in 3 days. I think he meant metaphorically that Jonah pointed out the evil in people's hearts and foretold that it would be destroyed if people didn't change – it was the message of the prophets.

The signs we should actually look for are when love has left people's hearts so that they ignore other's suffering, they cause

suffering for their own gain, they are pervasively violent, and a great many people are wicked and no one stops them. We should watch for leaders like Anthiohus, Nero, Hitler, Idi Amin (the Butcher of Uganda), and Slobodan Milosevic who supporters say claimed to bring peace but instead lead a murderous campaign against opponents and ethnic slaughter. They claim to offer peace, but in the end they cause great suffering and war. They sometimes openly oppose God and Christ, but more often their ways are in opposition to God, betraying their peaceful intentions.

It isn't the sky and the earth that we should be watching for signs of the end. It is ourselves that we should be watching.

Perhaps the signs we should be looking at are our inability to resolve world hunger, our inability to control violence done in the name of religion or greed or control, our inability to prevent oppression, and our inability to provide financial opportunity to lift people out of debilitating poverty. (I think we are making progress in all of these.) God asks us to do justice, love kindness, walk humbly with Him, and love our neighbors as ourselves. Those are the signposts we should be fixated on. (Micah 6:8, Leviticus 19:18, Matthew 22:36-40.)



# 4

## Modern Prophecy

### Summary

Modern prophecy, or oracles and signs and omens, are endlessly fascinating. Modern psychics seem to have very good accuracy. What are we to make of these signs that people are pointing to telling us that the world is going to end December 21, 2012? Are the signs real, and are there other signs that are more important?

### Discussion Guide

- Is there an validity to today's prophets?
- What is faith based on, blind faith, or seeing?
- Do stars and cyclical calendars actually tell us anything?
- What is the intent of modern prophecy
- How do you and I interpret signs and prophecy?
- What do we believe: God is love or God is destruction?

## Today's prophets

Modern prophecy abounds, but is there any truth in it? There have been prophets in the mold of Biblical prophets, such as the Sisters of Fatima, who saw visions. There have been oracles who were very religious, such as Nostradamus, Edgar Cayce, and Native American mystics (midewiwin). Various civilizations have created devices such as calendars (Mayan calendar), astrology, and the Chinese astrological calendar, which are predictive about eras and epochs, and even daily life. Should we take these calendars seriously?

Others look at the stars for other types of alignments, such as alignment with the center of the universe and the alignment of planets. Some look for confirming predictions in the codes in the Bible (Bible Code), or the Chinese I Ching. Even individuals with no predisposition toward being a prophet or oracle have given us visions of our individual end time: The afterlife as seen through near-death and other experiences. What can we make of all of this?

It depends on what the intent was. With prophets' messages and the oracles of prophets, we know the intent: To warn about moral misconduct and get people to change, to give hope, and to confirm the power and reality of God.

Each prophecy of the Sisters of Fatima was a vision of Mary, mother of Jesus. The first prophecy of the Sisters of Fatima was one of hope about the end of WWI. The second was a prediction about the coming of WWII. The third was about preventing the rise of the Soviet Union and an era of wickedness and violence, which the Church failed to do in time, and then the spiritual mechanism of its subsequent return to the fold. Each of these prophecies came true.

There was no real help given through the predictions in the Sisters' prophecies. In fact, the Vatican failed to act on the third prophecy. The value was in giving hope and confirming God.

The Bible Code acts in the same way. There is very little predictive value to the code as any finding can be interpreted in many ways. But after the event has occurred, the reality of the code stands out. After the event, we can see that the message was there all the time, if we only could have seen it, and now that the event has happened we see the code and we can appreciate the validity of it. God knew about this and joins us at the helm of our ultimate destiny.

It became very difficult for believers to believe in the late 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> Centuries. Some philosophers, linguists, scientists, and academics cast severe doubt on the validity of faith and anything unseen. It became fashionable not to believe, and actually it was a good cleansing for religion and spirituality. Much hogwash was cast out. During this time we also were given various symbols that helped us confirm the unseen and our faith.

Symbols participate actively in the things they point to. The Sisters of Fatima, Edgar Cayce, the Shroud of Turin, statues that cry, miraculous healings at certain places, Near Death Experiences, a myriad of prophets predicting doom, year 2000, planetary alignment, earth changes, the Bible Code... Each of these symbols has pointed to faith and asked us to consider the unseen more deeply, challenged us, and helped cleanse belief of the superfluous. Each has confirmed that the unseen is real. But we don't base our faith on signs, which are arbitrary and capricious.

Faith is not based on sight, nor is it based on blindness. Belief doesn't flourish in the shadows beyond what is known. Belief and faith exist because the way of God is proven to us through our experience. We trust God, we learn. Generally when we put the way of God first in our life, and treat others as God would have us treat them, our lives are much better. I say "generally" because it isn't a

mathematical formula with a theorem of proof. You run into difficult people who shun your love or don't react to it as they might.

The leadership of God can bring us all to much better conditions in this world, if we remain open to opportunity and don't sacrifice our ethics (morality). God is love.

I appreciated Charles Osgood's poetic observation about faith recently on the CBS program *Sunday Morning*. In my less eloquent language, he said that there are many things we can't see, such as love and faith, but that doesn't make them any less real. I want to pay tribute to his observation. I will add that we can't see the wind, magnetic lines of force, electricity, gravity, atoms, germs (without a microscope), and hope, but we can see the effects of these invisible things in our lives, and the effects are usually profound. The effects of faith, hope, and love are perhaps the most profound of any invisible force.

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### **Stars and calendars as prophets**

The ancient Mayans had extensive knowledge of the cosmos from close observation. Actually civilizations before them created the basis of the calendar, and the Mayans refined it. Most ancient civilizations were sensitized to the rhythms of nature, whether the winter/summer cycle which was essential to growing food, or the rotation in the skies (stars). Many of them created devices to measure them, and assigned some belief about human behavior and history to these cycles. The Mayans were more advanced than others.

The Mayan calendar began, some say, with the beginning of time, which for them was the alignment of the earth with the center of the galaxy. The calendar shows a very complex cycle during which things are thought to recur. Some believe that the calendar also marks the end of time as a major cycle ends, but others see that

"December 21, 2012 is simply the first day of the 13th b'ak'tun," and the beginning of a new cycle. ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Maya\\_calendar](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Maya_calendar).)

December 21, 2012 has become transfixed in people's minds as a date when the world might end. Many disparate facts from many disparate sources have been compiled into a body of literature that supports this idea. New Age proponents have been hailing the birth of a new age, Aquarius, for many years. But is it to end so soon?

Astrologers wonder. While today we mostly live inside and only look at pictures of the heavens from NASA, ancient humanity looked to the stars for measurement of time, intrigue, and guidance. People have believed that the alignment of stars has been an omen of things to come. The ancient Iraqis built ziggurats, which we believe were religiously oriented observatories.

The Mayans and earlier civilizations based their calendars on cosmological observances. Even the "Wise Men" of the East and the shepherds looked to a bright star to find the new baby Jesus. Is there wisdom and destiny in the stars? Science has looked at astrology and can find no consistent evidence of any meaning in it, except to say that scientists and doctors are more frequently born under Saturn... or what once was Saturn – the stars have actually shifted. Astrology and cyclical calendars are simply very vague and you can see anything in them that you want to see.

The ancients probably did notice that there are patterns in history. For example, we might see a pattern in the financial prosperity of the "Gay 90s" having recurred in 1990. But this is actually only nostalgia and requires overlooking that the 1890s were in a depression, and in the 1990s there was still world-wide famine and disease – we were prosperous enough that we could overlook other's problems. We only see what we want to see.

While Biblical prophets told us about the patterns to watch for, other civilizations tried to encode humanities recurrent tendencies into a device that would predict them. I can't say that there is anything other than some anecdotal evidence for astrological



calendars. You can read any astrological chart and see tendencies in it... for just about any or all individuals. We are remarkably alike in many ways, and we just ignore the differences in such charts. In contrast, the oracles in different cultures seem to have had more success.

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## **Understanding the intent of modern prophecy**

I was raised a Methodist with very conservative roots (fire and brimstone), but became interested in prophecy in the early 1960s when I read about Edgar Cayce, who was simply amazing in his accuracy. Cayce clearly foresaw the stock market crash and World Wars I and II, and left us with a tremendously large and accurate picture of many things, such as medical procedures, that at that time there was no knowledge of. I was on a new age binge until I ran into Hal Lindsey's books. In the late 1970s Hal Lindsey started his series of gloom and doom for this earth, beginning with *The Late Great Planet Earth*. I got rid of my Cayce books.

Within a few years I realized that the gloom and doom fatalistic interpretation of prophecy by Hal Lindsey was not theologically consistent with the God we know and who is reflected in the Bible and the teachings of Christ. The preoccupation with Armageddon led people to consider the world a lost place and to withdraw from it and from helping others. As Christians we were supposed to be reaching a hand out to the world, not shunning it. I began researching and writing the antithesis to Lindsey's premise in 1980, but of course good news is not as attention grabbing as predictions of wickedness and destruction. Anyway, the exercise was good for me.

### **Fairness to Hal Lindsey and “Pre-millennialists”**

In his series of books on prophecy, Hal Lindsey does not recommend that Christians withdraw from the world. He does recommend that they look forward to the coming of Christ. (In this

interpretation, Christians will be removed from the world before the Day of the Lord, so they have nothing to fear as the evil ones get destroyed. My contrary interpretation is that when Christians lose faith, as warned by Daniel and Christ, the Spirit of God within them will no longer be in the world, and at that point neither are the Christians.)

There is a tendency for Christians, and actually all religious people, to gravitate toward a circle of friends who believe similarly to themselves, so they dissociate in many ways from the remainder of the people in the world. Some consider the world an evil and lost place that they must remain “consecrated” from. As they do so, they lose their opportunities to influence others. No one can see their faith demonstrated in their actions. They overlook the example of Christ who was accused by the religious elite of the time, of “eating with sinners,” to whom he was always reaching out.

My open-mindedness, my spiritual journey, helped me understand two things. One, some of us are mired in tradition and blinded by it. Most of us see what we want to see and ignore what doesn't seem to fit. The polarization prevalent in our world today is dramatic evidence of how people see what they want to see and turn away from any evidence to the contrary. Two, I also know that this stubborn approach to life is somewhat necessary in a changing world that provides few moorings. But faith is not based on fact, but on belief and experience.

In my spiritual journey I was slowly moved toward understanding the intent and context of the literature, and more recently wrote *The Ontology of God*, which is about the nature of God as seen through history, and His intent using law, mercy, and love in our lives. We have to look at the nature of things and their intent to fully understand and appreciate them.

What is the intent of these foretellings that we are so preoccupied with? Edgar Cayce's intent was simply to help others. He wasn't on a mission, except to help. His theological leaning was that we are on a journey of spiritual awakening and improvement, and reconciliation with God. He was asked questions as he went into the trance and he answered them. When he awoke from his trance state, he had no recollection at all of what he had spoken. There was no agenda. He was an oracle answering questions.

Was the intent of the Mayan calendar to predict the end of the world? Probably not. The intent appears to be to predict recurring cycles of influence over Mayan humanity. When one cycle ends, another simply begins.

What about the alignment of our planets with the center of the galaxy? It is difficult to see intent in science and the natural universe. Nature does what nature does irrespective of humanity. We are seeing light from thousands of years ago from the galaxy. We know where the center was... well, 28,000 years ago. Twenty-eight thousand years is how long it takes for light to get from the center of the galaxy to our solar system. So our observation, our clock, is always 28,000 years behind. The galactic alignment took place 28,000 years ago.

There are two things in the center of the galaxy: 1) Sagittarius A, a very complex group including a supernova planet obscured by a cloud of cosmic dust, and a strong radio source; and 2) a large black hole. What exactly does alignment with Sagittarius A mean? The entire galaxy has little effect on the earth. Its gravitational pull remains the same regardless of alignment. In contrast, when the stronger influences of planets within our solar system align, which happens about every four years, we see no unexpected results. It would be difficult to imagine that the weaker galactic alignment does anything.

The sun completes its celestial precession every 26,000 years, and supposedly in 2012 the solar zenith and the sun's elliptical path align perfectly with the center of our Milky Way Galaxy... or where it was 28,000 years ago. The galaxy and our solar system are in flux

- they move. Admittedly the alignment won't move very far, but it's significant that there is a 28,000 year mismatch on a 26,000 year event.

The galaxy has minimal influence over the earth, and that gravitational influence is constant. Any effect is not science based; it is simply our interpretation of the event. If there is any "force" in alignment with the galactic center, or any mystical force in it, it is simply in the power of our belief. So we have to look at the intent of the interpreter. Interpreters abound, so I will leave determining intent up to you. But it is another thing that compels us to have a deeper look at our faith and evaluate where we are as a people of God.

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### **New age and change: The drivers of social change**

From a more scientific point of view, 2012 is an interesting year. Actually the earth goes through many types of movements, not just precession, and there is some effect shown in the earth's climate from these. See Milankovitch cycles. Sunspots go through an 11 year cycle and this peaks again in 2012. Some scientists believe this cycle will be more disruptive of communications than most, and that we will see a lot of solar related activity, such as the Northern Lights. Societal and cultural revolutions are believed by many to peak during the sunspot cycle, but this belief may be a case of researchers finding what they are looking for - in other words carefully selecting the evidence from the pile.

Cataclysm obviously causes change, such as extinction. That's huge, and it's lights out, but we don't have any real indication that will happen. Nature does what nature does, and from our observation, God does not seem to have a hand in it.

There are other very real causes of large and important changes in humanity. The world changes when the time is ripe and often begins with a triggering event or a tipping point. Religious philosophers sometimes call this "zeitgeist," borrowing from a German word. In

this sense it means that the time has come for something to happen; events and knowledge make the time pregnant with possibility.

An example of this happening is breakthroughs in science and industry that often occur at multiple points around the world at the same time. The knowledge is there, the need is there, and multiple people working independently discover or invent the breakthrough at the same time.

Malcolm Gladwell gives us another example of a mechanism of social change in his book *The Tipping Point*. He shows how Paul Revere may have been very instrumental in spreading the word and getting people into action, as opposed to his compatriot who ineffectively rode in the opposite direction to sound the alarm. Paul Revere had tremendous social connections, and was a subject matter expert on the British (a connector and a maven), while his compatriot was not. The midnight ride of Paul Revere brought out the militia in several towns to oppose the British troops. The facilitating connections were with Paul Revere.

Sometimes change is sparked by events or technology, such as the Internet revolution being sparked by technological advances and the need to communicate and research information, spurred on by such advances as email. Sometimes change is sparked by enough people having the philosophical or practical insight into something to create a change, such as Pasteur's insight into bacteriology and today's advances in virology, or the way Postmodernism challenged staid and obstinate absolutist modernistic thought in science and religion.

The French Revolution was a grassroots rebellion that grew out of the enlightenment. The American Revolution was a grassroots rebellion that grew out of objection to foreign control without representation. Christ brought a revolution to the Middle East and Western world in spiritual thought that rejected militarism and autocratic religious rule. Perhaps we are seeing the dawning of a new era, and December 5 or 21, 2012 may symbolize that. But it isn't the cataclysmic end of the world.

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## **How do you and I interpret signs and prophecy?**

The world is not short on seers who look at the future, or oracles who are asked about the future and make predictions. The most relevant question I suppose is what is our orientation in interpreting what we hear and see? Do we see the world through the eyes of a loving God whose stated purpose is to spread love and bring all people back to Himself? Or do we see the world as some tragic place doomed to failure in which people succumb to evil and are ultimately punished or destroyed?

In one somewhat common precognition viewing arena, people are invited to look at a blank wall and tell what they see about the future. Some see people living happily in small villages on this earth. Some see people living in space. Some see a caustic world collapsing in on itself from the weight of evil people and carnage. Are all of these futures true, or do people actually see what they are predisposed to see?

The prophecies of Nostradamus come to mind. Nostradamus was a physician who was active during a time of tremendous suffering and death from the plague, and tremendous persecution of "heretics" by the church. Not to take away anything from Nostradamus' psychic abilities, but did his environment influence his attitude, and predispose what he might see? He certainly saw enough destruction in his own time... and in the future.

Many other individuals have been seers in that they have had near death experiences and been drawn to the light of a loving God and met loved ones who have already passed. They have returned with a renewed sense of purpose. What does this anecdotal evidence tell us about God and the hereafter? Will these accounts someday be canonized into scriptural literature?

How do we interpret the events of today? We are surrounded by awesome signs and wonders. Ice is melting on the earth that hasn't been melted in 10,000 years. The magnetic poles are undergoing more shifts than ever before in the history that we can see recorded

in the earth. People are having a tremendous influence on our environment. There is constant war going on in various places of the world, and much of it is blamed on religion, of all things. The sun is completing a 26,000 year cycle and aligning with the galaxy. The world is changing at an accelerating pace, due to technology, making our cultures much less stable. Nations and terrorists have the power to destroy the world. But as awesome as these things are, these signs may have no significance as signposts. It is our own behavior, when it becomes wicked, that is the catalyst for end times, and is the sign that the end times are coming.

What do we want to see in the future? Do we think that predictions of cataclysmic events are a catalyst for change? Do we think that human destiny is tragically and deterministically carved in stone by an uncaring God who wants to see everyone destroyed in a fit of vengeful rage? Are we but actors in a play written by someone else? Or does our knowledge and experience of God (our faith) tell us that God is a loving God who wants our presence, gives us a voice in our destiny, and cares about us and our future?

One of the dangers in seeing only what we want to see is that our vision can become a self-fulfilling prophecy.

# 5

## 2010: Birth pains of a new century

**What are our defining issues, and can morality save us?**

### **Summary**

Faith, Hope, and Love: The greatest of these is love. In the 2000+ years since Christ, and thousands of years before Christ, religions have taught love. Love means to be compassionate for each other, to care about each other, to treat each other as we would like to be treated, and to assist each other. Love in the theological sense is often called compassion and charity, yet even these two powerful words don't quite capture the essence of love. We may have difficulty defining love, but we see it in our actions. Love is often seen in our behavior toward each other, or morality.

Viewed through the lens of love, what have the first ten years of this century defined as issues for us? Can morality save us?

### **Discussion Guide**

- How do we evaluate ourselves?
- This age of change - is this the age of dragons?
- Is polarization our worst dragon?
- Can we slay the dragon with truth and love?



## **How do we evaluate ourselves?**

For several years I wrote articles on the State of the Union, ([http://www.visualwriter.com/WhatKindWorld/StateOfTheUnion\\_Jan2008\\_p2.htm](http://www.visualwriter.com/WhatKindWorld/StateOfTheUnion_Jan2008_p2.htm)), in which I evaluated several aspects of the US and our world. I had to ask myself, "By what standard do I do this evaluation?" I'm not the judge and sole arbiter of the human condition and behavior. But in the US and Western world, we often call ourselves a "Christian nation."

Not to be exclusive - the values of other religions are very similar to Christianity, and the US Constitution and US government are not based on Christianity.

We consider ourselves to have religious values – that is, to look to a higher being for guidance, and base our governmental values on our spiritual values (not doctrine). In the US Constitution, and in Christianity, we have high standards. The US Constitution, which contains the articles by which this nation (and many other nations who used it as a basis) founded itself.

One message rings loud and clear from the US Constitution: "We the People." It is not "We the government," nor "We the corporation," nor "We the democracy," nor "We the Congress," nor "We the Supreme Court," nor "We the capitalists." We may appreciate these values and elements, but most of these are completely absent from the Constitution. It is "we the people" who join together in mutual support to our mutual benefit - this is the idea around which we gather as a people.

Christianity is not a political movement, and in this country religion is clearly separated from politics. Christianity is a religion, but more importantly it is people who join together to follow the way that Christ has shown us. It's significant that we collectively endorse the

values established by Christ and religion. So between the US Constitution, and Christianity, we have a way to judge our progress - not ultimately judge ourselves - but try to understand what we need to do to improve.

The Apostle Paul, the writer of 1 Corinthians 13, addressed us about the things we value. He said (paraphrased), look, we can know everything there is to know; we can have enough faith to move a mountain; we can give everything there is to give. But if we don't have love, we're just making a lot of noise, moving a lot of dirt, and making ourselves broke. In the end, it is all meaningless unless it is done out of love.

Paul goes on to say (paraphrased) that love means being patient with others and kind to others. Kindness is an important historical Jewish ideal that includes giving or charity. People who love are not jealous of others or rude to others, they aren't arrogant in the way they view and treat others, they aren't irritated with others' situations or resentful of their needing help. People who love don't insist on having everything their own way. Love is the willingness to carry a burden for others, and to supportively endure with others while they suffer.

In this we have a nice summary of what we are about as a people - the ideals and values that we share. We join together in a way that is supportive of each other so that we can all benefit or prosper. We put aside arrogance, rudeness, jealousy, and irritations over people's difficult situations so that we don't offend each other. We stand ready to help carry each other's burdens and endure the difficult path ahead.

We have to weigh other values that we have in the light of our primary values. Those values include: Fierce independence, everyone carries their own weight, and the right to seek our own prosperity. When conflicts between values arise, then we know we need to defer to our primary values.

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## **Out with the old, in with the new**

The roaring 1990s, like the roaring 1890s, were a time of unequalled economic prosperity, but held the seeds of disparity as wealth continued to accumulate with the wealthy, and the plight of low income people continued to decline, while the middle class shrank.

In the 1990s, Terrorism struck us, but outside of our own borders, so we didn't really have to worry about it. We were caught up in an economic bubble that seemed like it would rise forever, and we just didn't have to worry about our neighbors either inside our borders or outside.

The first ten years of 2000 did not glide in with a whimper. The first decade brought to light many problems that we preferred to ignore in the 1990s. Most of these problems are interdependent on each other.

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## **The age of change, the age of dragons**

It is symbolic that long-time CBS news anchor, who was retired, Walter Cronkite died at the end of this first decade of this Century. Cronkite was the anchor of CBS News for many years, and was known as the most trusted man in America. We believed that he tried hard to be impartial and present an unbiased selection and view of the news. He used to host the popular and long running CBS program The Twentieth Century, which covered significant events of the 20th century. Other news people today try to follow in his footsteps, but in the last twenty years we have seen a significant departure from unbiased reporting.

### ***End of our age of innocence***

There is a reason for this radical departure from reality. When people can't cope, they hide. During the last twenty years we have had major developments in this world that many people have had no idea how to cope with. Spurred by excessive competition from

inside the US and outside, we have lost entire sections of our economy, and entire communities, losing jobs while wages race toward the bottom.

The current popularity of the 1930s stage play, *Our Town*, by Thornton Wilder, is indicative of our need to hold on to something in our lives. It is a play about the fabric of our daily lives and the sameness of it. Divorced of setting (in limbo or black box), there is nothing to distract the audience from what is important in our lives - not the dazzling settings of today, nor the magic of stage devices. The characters and audience are led to appreciate the things that remain the same in our lives, such as our family voices, and the rhythms of daily activity and events. The play stands out in that emphasis in contrast to our ever-changing lives of today. It reminds us of what we can look to, to hold on to.

New technology has replaced many skilled people in many fields, and is about to do so again in the computer software repair field as platforms become more reliable and programs move off site (Cloud Computing). Middle manager jobs and automotive manufacturing jobs have evaporated, and with it the middle class has shrunk substantially. Corporations have become very lean to meet competition and the demands of the stock market for high quarterly profits. We are fearful of job loss and low wages - we don't know how to cope. The world has changed and we haven't. Our reaction is to hide from it, or hate it and find someone or something to blame it on. Where is the dragon slayer?

We were once a virgin land that had never been attacked in the 19th and 20th Centuries. Now foreign threats that can destroy us are dragging our armies into conflict in many parts of the world, creating another costly drain on our economy. We didn't much listen when they tried to blow up the World Trade Center or the US Cole in the 1990s. They were incompetent. They failed. And if anyone had suggested the security measures we take today, they would have been laughed out of office. But then in September 2001 the terrorists perfected their game, and they brought down not only the

twin towers, they partially brought down the Pentagon, and tried to destroy the White House.

In the last ten years, terrorists have made numerous attempts to strike inside the US. We can no longer ignore the threat on foreign shores - they are at our door. We fear we have no response that will end terrorism. The world has changed, and we haven't. Our reaction is to hide from it, or hate it and find someone or something to blame it on. Where is the dragon slayer?

Once we could do as we pleased with our environment. We thought we could impact the environment forever. The world is a big place, and you can pollute and kill without ever seeing a change. But we can't. Now our environment is beginning to impact us. (See State of the Onion, 2006, Environment at [www.visualwriter.com/WhatKindWorld/StateOfTheOnionJan2006.htm](http://www.visualwriter.com/WhatKindWorld/StateOfTheOnionJan2006.htm).) We are seeing dramatic changes to our environment, particularly from man's activities, and partially from natural weather changes.

Bison have been reduced from 30 million to only 1000. Trappers in the 19th. Century nearly drove the beaver extinct. Passenger pigeons once clouded the sky in the US, but now hunting has made them extinct. North Atlantic Cod numbers have dropped 80% in 30 years from overfishing, and nets have destroyed the fish beds so they won't come back. Topsoil, the thin layer of ground that we require for growing crops, is being eroded by wind and water erosion - because it is laid bare during farming. The ocean currents that keep Europe warm are in danger of stopping, which may cause an ice age.

We are seeing land thawing that hasn't been unfrozen in 10,000 years. Ice is melting from mountain peaks, such as the Alps, so that there is no more skiing. Permafrost is melting in northern climates, which will lead to increased CO2 levels, which accelerates global warming. The Arctic ice is melting much faster than any model has predicted in the last ten years, so ocean levels are rising and threatening many major cities, and some islands and their people

will vanish, all happening within 10 to 50 years.

We're fearful that the environment on which we depend for life, is going to turn on us. It's too big to ignore, but too big a problem for individuals to consider, and governments have little will to impact their own economies with changes. The easiest thing to do is simply hide from it and hope the problem goes away until we die, and then it can be some other person's problem. The world has changed and we haven't. (We have to ask, are we stewards of this earth, and responsible citizens, or are we simply here for the fun?) Our reaction is to hide from it, or hate it and find someone or something to blame it on. Where is the dragon slayer?

Job satisfaction dropped from a high in 1987 of 61% to only 45% in 2010, despite being in a severe recession when everyone should be grateful to even have a job. ( See: [http://money.cnn.com/2010/01/05/news/economy/job\\_satisfaction\\_report/index.htm](http://money.cnn.com/2010/01/05/news/economy/job_satisfaction_report/index.htm).) The biggest problems are that jobs are not interesting, and there is no job security. Competition has slimmed corporations to the point that people are simply a commodity to be purchased only when needed. The world has changed and we haven't learned to adapt. Our reaction is to hide from it, or hate it and find someone or something to blame it on. Where is the dragon slayer?

Our economy has grown steadily since the Great Depression in the 1930s. The US economy appeared to be invincible. In 2008 the economy fell with a resounding thud. There were huge losses in the stock market, any banks were destroyed because of risky loans, the housing industry plummeted in value, unemployment rose to over 10%, and wages are now lower than in the late 1990s. The number of those living below the poverty level actually increased from 11.3 to 13.2%.

Detroit automakers followed the airline industries into bankruptcy, largely due to market incompetence (enticing people with ever larger gas guzzlers, and pandering to union inefficiency, instead of designing sleek and more economical cars). The world has changed

and we haven't. Our reaction is to hide from it, or hate it and find someone or something to blame it on. Where is the dragon slayer?

Medical prices increased at double-digit annual rates for the last 20 years, so employers either had to reduce benefit expenses or drop medical benefits. Insurance companies dropped those who are sick and refused to insure pre-existing conditions, and 47 million US citizens could not purchase health insurance. The only field expected to remain stable and grow is medical care. Yet nurses are underpaid, and short-staffed due to supply, and physicians can't afford to keep their offices open, so they are retiring early. Companies with vested interests in keeping things just as they are, influence the government and the marketplace to keep things just as they are... to our destruction. The world has changed and we haven't. Our reaction is to hide from it, or hate it and find someone or something to blame it on. Where is the dragon slayer?

Technology is one of the main drivers of change, and is turning our world upside down. It is very hard to cope with. I'm partly a technology person, having started my careers in radio announcing, then electronics, medical and beginning in 1996 in computer and Internet communications. I've somehow always managed to be on the cutting edge of technology, working both sides of communications, technical and communicating, as I do today. I use it for ministry and publication. Yet it is a very difficult field to keep up with. Interactive 3D environments have been available for years on the Internet, and now television is going to a version of 3D. My next venture is probably a FaceBook blog, and I'm behind the times, even though I did a research paper on the merging of Internet and TV and movies on demand back in 2000, and began publishing on the Internet in 1996 and ebooks in 2008. Whew, things move fast!

Anything that happens in the world today, relevant or irrelevant, is instantly communicated around the world. If you aren't part of it, you may get buried by it. If you purchased new technology three years ago, in audio, video, computer, TV, recordings, radio, telephone, communications, medical, electronic games, GPS, etc., it will probably still work for another three years, but you are already

behind and may have difficulty with your technology being outmoded, lacking in new features, and incompatible with other technology.

Just as we think we have a handle on the world and know how to use it, it changes. Technology changes every aspect of the world around us, from the way we cook our meals, to the way we communicate, to the way we travel. We can't ever be caught up with technology. The world has changed and we haven't. Our reaction is to hide from it, or hate it and find someone or something to blame it on. Where is the dragon slayer?

Job security?! There is none! The US workforce is simply another expendable and replaceable part in an on-demand assembly line. Any job can be moved to any other place in the US, or eliminated by technology, or outsourced to a foreign country. Yet the same can be said of any company. There is no security in employment or in income. Only the following fields are expected to grow: Medicine, education, legal services, clergy, computer and network analysts and software engineers, financial services, real estate, welders, and automotive service. The rest of us are in quicksand.

The world has changed and we haven't. We are fearful of losing our jobs, which can lose our lifestyle, home, retirement, career, marriage, and education for our kids. Our reaction is to hide from it, or hate it and find someone or something to blame it on. Where is the dragon slayer?

Our government in the first ten years of this decade, has been challenged and found incompetent: Ineffective government response to natural disasters (New Orleans flooding), the economy (no 60 minute fix), the Madoff and ponzi schemes (failure to monitor, evaluate, and regulate), terrorist strikes (failure to protect), illegal immigration (failure to agree to an appropriate and effective response so the legislators do nothing). The world has changed and we haven't. Our reaction is to hide from it, or hate it and find someone or something to blame it on. Where is the dragon slayer?



Religion has changed. The US no longer has a substantial Christian faith majority - there are large numbers of Islamists and Hindus, and their memberships are growing while Christian membership declines. The mainstream denominations have been fading out since the 1960s, and other denominations are beginning to follow a similar trend, while other religious groups rise in numbers. Young adults don't find the mainstream denominations relevant in their lives, and as the baby-boom generation marches in lockstep out of the building during the next quarter century, the various Christian denominations are likely to go with them. We are fearful of losing our religious moorings. The world has changed and we haven't. Our reaction is to hide from it, or hate it and find someone or something to blame it on. Where is the dragon slayer?

We are in a time of great change - revolution - very difficult to cope with. It isn't that the world has changed. It changes and changes and changes. It's upside down, and when we get oriented, it goes upside down again. It never stops. We're disoriented. We hardly know what has meaning anymore. We don't know where we belong in employment or culture. The world has changed and we haven't. Our reaction is to hide from it, or hate it and find someone or something to blame it on. Where is the dragon slayer?

Whatever shall we do?

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### **Enter the dragon.**

To borrow a Bruce Lee (martial arts movie) title, "Enter the Dragon." The dragon is already in the building. Let me paint a face on this dragon by quoting President Roosevelt, when faced with The Great Depression: "So, first of all, let me assert my firm belief that the only thing we have to fear is fear itself -- nameless, unreasoning, unjustified terror which paralyzes needed efforts to convert retreat into advance."

Cool heads have not prevailed in today's climate of unnerving rapid change and fear. Many people are clinging to their seats, unable to escape the bus that is racing out of control headlong somewhere,

screaming for their lives, and hoping for any small explanation or hope to save them from the dragon. But many are unwittingly holding onto the tail of the dragon.

Who is the dragon? People masquerading as truth. There are always people who, for whatever reason, profess their misconceptions and inaccuracies about the times, sometimes through misinformation, more often by crackpots or those motivated by their own greed. For example, it would still be very difficult to convince some that the US did not enter WWII for economic reasons, even though the US was dragged very reluctantly into both war theaters. People believe what matches their attitude. That's the problem, we want emotionally to blame happenings on someone, so we look for any scapegoat. Our gut reaction is to hate it and blame it on someone.

Scapegoats aren't difficult to find in today's news environment. We have in the US a large segment of our population who are being bombarded daily by fear and disinformation mongers who sound like they know something, but instead steadily polarize people into a state of hysteria. They are not cast in the Walter Cronkite mold of news reporting. They are completely reactionary and incendiary, casting immediate blame on their opponents for anything that happens, and relating the news from a very polarized point of view.

The terrifying thing about these broadcasters, politicians, speakers, and writers, is that they are as zealous and as dedicated to their causes as any religious zealot. They focus on building a mountain of proof for their cause, while downplaying or reinterpreting any contrary evidence, seeing only what they want to see. They are ideologists who are becoming more and more extremist, now willing to not only distort the truth and deceive for their purposes, but to outright lie to swamp any opposition. Liars can't be trusted. Lying is a sign that their moral integrity is gone, and how far they will go to get their way is anyone's guess. Unfortunately the actions of religious and political zealots often become not only harmful but violent.

I'm not comparing these people to the rogues of history, but they are edging closer to groups that use disinformation, propaganda, and

inflammatory rhetoric in their disinformation campaigns. Consider the disinformation propagated by Hitler and the Ku Klux Klan, who often misused religion and poorly conceived history, and consider what happened as a result. Disinformation and misuse of religion has been at the heart of many cults that prey on people who have genuine needs like ours today, such as the Branch Davidians and Jim Jones, both of which garnered cult followings and ended in violent conflict and disaster.

Often there is just an element of religious or other truth in this disinformation so that it sounds credible, and then it flies off in a direction that can only be considered hate and violence. Hate and violence are clearly against the direction God points us toward. Consider the Civil War and the deep feelings that were inflamed by the rhetoric of various men who stirred up the passions of others until the result was a deep split and violent war. Consider what is going on in Iran with President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad simply lying to the people about things like the Holocaust, to polarize people into hating Jews and distrusting the Western world. A similar thing is happening with these US politicians and broadcasters who are stirring up people who have both strong feelings of fear, and a feeling of powerlessness to create or oppose change, to polarize them for their cause.

Congressional approval has been dismal for years. People notice what Congress does, and approval hovers around 14%. Our Congress is deadlocked on many issues on which we are deeply divided as a nation, largely because of polarizing rhetoric. Legislative progress gets made by ridiculous back room deals through which congressmen reap huge benefits for their districts in exchange for votes on legislation, or congressmen slip legislation into their bills which are actually written by special interest groups.

We are told by leaders, "This is the way things get done in Washington." People are reacting. Congressional approval is 14% and recently Massachusetts voted against more of the same by electing a moderate Republican over a Democrat bureaucrat for the seat of a Democrat pillar, Kennedy. Incumbents are losing elections.

The deadlock is encouraging abuse of the political system. Deadlock often stops important legislation because the people who are for or against the legislation are uncompromising. There are few people in the middle to consider the bills and swing one way or another - they are all polarized into voting blocs which stand rigidly on their agendas.

For many years we have watched many problems in the US and world go unresolved. Some we simply lack the experience to solve - eventually we will get there. Others we have the power to resolve, but don't. Polarization is often the reason. We have a belief that independence and cooperation are opposites. They aren't. Some have believed that organizations and systems can monitor and control themselves. They can't - they require intelligent people to shepherd and guide them with close monitoring and regulation.

We see religious intolerance - it is the result of prejudice, organizations trying to perpetuate themselves, and hate. We see poverty, lack of opportunity, and starvation, and fail to address it because it might affect voting. We see drug addiction, and haven't the experience to know that we have to be there for people, not control and imprison them - we are polarized into believing that wars on drugs and imprisonment is the answer, even though it doesn't work.

We see people devoid of purpose and outside of our society. Sometimes they become terrorists or do mass killings, and we fail to help them find their way before they become so polarized that they become radical and visit terror on us. We find many people polarized with the idea of self-aggrandizement (greed) and unwilling to do mutual support.

These are the defining issues of our new century: Polarization, independence with cooperation, monitoring and regulation of business, religious intolerance, poverty and lack of opportunity, drug addiction, and lack of purpose that leads to radicalization.

(Terrorists have come from all backgrounds, from poverty to the well educated, and the most recent self-radicalizing terrorists have

been doctors. Some are simply forced to do murder/suicide missions. Others are people who react to injustices like Abu Ghraib, Guantanamo, and Western soldiers killing Muslims, and become preoccupied with terrorist Web sites, driving their anger to the boiling point, so they see their purpose as martyrdom, until their only relief can be to strike out with something that seems powerful, such as terror.)

Polarization plays a central role in all of these problems. We will not solve our problems until we solve polarization, and the interfering roles of special interests and getting re-elected.

We need to stop going in the direction of these deep polarizations in our society if we are to survive. I'm not a prophet, but I've watched the Congress and population, for over 50 years, and I see the warning signs, and it very well could end in violent conflict as opposing camps fail to find central ground.

If these agents of polarization want to assist others with the difficulties we face, the appropriate thing to do is help give people ways to understand change and cope. We don't dare point fingers and argue with these agents - this will only harden their attitudes and heighten the angry and argumentative rhetoric. They thrive on controversy, which brings publicity, which brings an audience.

These people are not only rabble-rousers; they are symbols of the disenfranchisement and powerlessness that people feel in this environment of constant change. We need to substitute different symbols - ones that give people hope, educate and inform them, assist them, and help them cope. This can defuse the anger, hate, and blame and replace it with positive feelings and action. Hopefully this is one of the things people will find on the [www.onespiritresources.com](http://www.onespiritresources.com) Web site.

There is a place for entertainment, and I love to be entertained. But when issues and important information are brought to light in the news, that is not the place for entertainment. We have substituted polarization and spectacles for reality, and it is destroying us. In our vision of ourselves in this world, quoting myself, "We join together

in a way that is supportive of each other so that we can all benefit or prosper. We put aside arrogance, rudeness, jealousy, and irritations over people's difficult situations so that we don't offend each other. We stand ready to help carry each other's burdens and endure the difficult path ahead."

The issues of these polarized movements are real and we need to address them. But the thing that bothers me the most is that within these polarized movements, I see in many the faces of selfishness and hate. I sense that many of these people are simply opposed to helping others in any way, and the movement is just a convenient vehicle for them to avoid loving others. They are wolves in sheep's clothing, hiding their real beliefs behind pleasing but misleading rhetoric. Their law is simply survival of the fittest, and bias against others. Unfortunately what they don't acknowledge is that we all can be needing assistance, including them.

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### **Enter the dragon slayer.**

The real dragon slayers are truth and love. As religious leaders, and the press, one thing we can do is demand honesty and integrity from our politicians and news media. We can fight fear mongering and outright lies with truth. But most importantly we need to continually remind this nation of what we are about - what are our values - things we can hold on to as life around us changes.