

CHARACTERISTICS OF PROPHECY

To interpret Bible prophecy we must understand its main characteristics. Not to do so may lead us far astray of the prophetic message we seek to interpret.

1. Prophetic perspective. By perspective we mean the prophet's point of view. It is best to consider the prophet's prediction of future events like looking at a number of mountain peaks from a long distance. From his vantage point they may seem to be close, however they are far apart. We only see this looking backward. The prophets saw two great "peaks" – the first and the second comings of Christ. An example is Isaiah 61:1-3. Jesus claimed that this prophecy was fulfilled in Him (Luke 4:16-21). Yet only part of the prophecy was fulfilled at His first coming. He closed the scroll after the words "to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord," before He stated, "and the vengeance of our God." The remainder of the prophecy of Isaiah 61:1-3 will not be fulfilled until He comes again. At that time the remainder of verses 2 and 3 will be fulfilled.
2. Near and far fulfillment. Many prophecies see a fulfillment nearer the time of the prediction. In the prophecy also has a later fulfillment. Isaiah 7:14 is an example, which prophesies the virgin birth of Jesus. The context indicates there is a near fulfillment in the birth of a son to a young woman who was a virgin at the time of the prophecy was given. She gave birth within a short period of time, but Matthew applies the prophecy to Jesus (Matthew 1:22-23). God used the prophecy as a sign to King Ahaz within a short time, but the greater purpose was to give a sign of the Messiah's birth to a virgin.
3. Figurative language. We have studied figures of speech. Prophecy uses these frequently. Prophecies also contain literal statements. Interpreting figurative language is one thing, but there is a greater problem. Are the prophecies themselves to be interpreted literally or figuratively? The solution is to see how the New Testament interprets Old Testament prophecy. Operate on the premise that fulfilled prophecy is the key to understanding unfulfilled prophecy. [1] Some prophecies are fulfilled literally in the New Testament: Christ's birthplace (Micah 5:2 & Matthew 2:6). Christ entering Jerusalem on a donkey (Zechariah 9:9 & Matthew 21:5); Christ to be born of a virgin (Isaiah 7:14 & Matthew 1:22-23); Soldiers dividing Christ's garments (Psalm 22:18 & John 19:23-24). [2] Some prophecies are fulfilled in a figurative way: Christ, the stone rejected by the builders (Psalm 118:22 & 1 Peter 2:7); Christ the shepherd is smitten (Zechariah 13:7 & Matthew 26:31). [3] Some prophecies are fulfilled in a spiritual way, an Old Testament reality prefiguring a spiritual New Testament reality: The New Covenant with Israel prefigures the spiritual relationship of the church now (Jeremiah 31:31-34 & Hebrews 8:8-12); Earthly Zion prefigures the heavenly home of believers (Isaiah 2:2-3 & Hebrews 12:22). If the New Testament interprets prophecies in these ways, then it seems clear that other prophecies may be interpreted in these ways. [4] Special grammar. Normally prophecies use the same grammar as the rest of Scripture, but sometimes prophecy has special ways of using tenses: Past tense verbs are frequently used for future events. Isaiah 53:1-10 is written in the past tense even though it was spoken about 700 years before Christ was sacrificed. This is referred to as "prophetic past" tense. The fulfillment of prophecy is so sure that the event is prophesied as if it had already happened. Also, present tense verbs may be used for the future. Zechariah 9:9 says, "Your king comes to you." It is written in the present tense, but it looks to a future fulfillment. [5] Conditional and unconditional predictions. Many prophecies are unconditional. God says what will happen without any conditions. Others depend on the response of people. These are conditional. Many times conditional predictions are general prophecies of either blessing or judgment, rather than the foretelling of specific events. Examples of these are Deuteronomy 28; Ezekiel 18:30-32; 33:1-15). [6] Revealing and hiding truth.

Many prophecies do not reveal all the details. Daniel's vision (7:15-16) reveals four beasts that represent four world kingdoms that would rule over Israel. The names of these kingdoms were not mentioned, yet we know what they are by looking at history. This is an example of truth being revealed and concealed in the vision. We must be careful in interpreting unfulfilled prophecies with complete certainty regarding details.