OLD TESTAMENT PROPHETS
Primary Source: Building Confidence in Prophecy - Values Hiding in Old Testament Prophets
by Jim Girdwood
a chapter in A Humble Defense – Evidence for the Christian Faith

Introduction (not in Girdwood’s writing)

In his book, A Survey of Old Testament Introduction, Gleason Archer, Jr. writes (p. 295), “A prophecy is an oral or written disclosure in words through a human mouthpiece transmitting the revelation of God and setting forth His will to man. In the broader sense, even events, such as the crossing of the Red Sea or the episode of the brazen serpent, may have a prophetic significance, in that their importance is not exhausted by the historical occurrence itself... In this broader sense, then, a great portion of the Old Testament constitutes prophecy; but in the narrower sense the term is confined to the discourses of those specially chosen and anointed men who occupied the prophetic office.”

Concerning the nature of the prophetic office, Archer writes (p. 296), “The responsibility of the Old Testament prophets was not principally to predict the future in the modern sense of the word prophesy, but rather to tell forth the will of God which he had communicated by revelation.”

Archer enumerates four principal elements in the ministry of the Old Testament prophets (p. 297-299).
1. The prophet had the responsibility of encouraging God’s people to trust only in Jehovah’s mercy and delivering power, rather than in their own merits or strength, or in the might of human allies.
2. The prophet was responsible to remind his people that safety and blessedness were conditioned upon their faithful adherence to the covenant, and that this adherence involved not only doctrinal conviction but a sincere submission of their will to obey God with their whole heart and to lead a godly life... In other words, a saving faith involves a sanctified walk.
3. The prophet was to encourage Israel in respect to the future.
4. Hebrew prophecy was to seal the authoritativeness of God’s message by the objective verification of fulfilled prophecy. ... Fulfillment of predictive prophecy would provide objective evidence incapable of any other explanation than that He who imparted the prediction was the same Lord of history who would bring its fulfillment to pass.”

Our desire to know the future is evidenced by the
• Proliferation of books and movies on the subject of prophecy
• Attendance of thousands at the latest seminar
• Tendency of many to look for clues and hints from Old Testament prophets about current events

QUESTIONS TO PONDER

Should we read our Bible through the lens of this morning’s newspaper?
If Bible prophecies are only now being fulfilled, of what value were they to the people living then?
Was it the prophets’ purpose to provide for us knowledge of our future on earth? Was their focus on us or on Jesus?
Should the multiple revisions in books and seminars, prompted by the latest world crisis, cause us to be somewhat suspicious? Girdwood cites Proverbs 18:17 in this regard: “The first to present his case seems right, till another comes forward and questions him.”

Girdwood suggests that people are so easily persuaded. We tend to latch onto the latest and most exciting development. The more sensational, the more appealing. And if it can be packaged in a slick, series, complete with full-color promotional materials and a DVD presentation with workbooks designed to fill that thirteen-week hole in your curriculum, we conclude it must be directly from God. Never mind the fact that it is clearly identified as fiction!

Girdwood writes (p. 108), “There is a vague feeling that someone or something out there somewhere knows something about the future. Is it wise to grasp at anything that offers some promise of that information — Ouija boards, palm readings, crystal balls, tarot cards, astrologers, ‘careful Bible students,’ even the deep inner self? Someone does know that future. God knows. And he has told us in the Bible all we need to know about it.”

The greatest value of the Old Testament prophets is not that they predicted the future but rather that they pointed to Jesus. Girdwood makes the interesting observation that the fastest rate of growth in the church occurred before any of the New Testament books were written. He notes that the message of the apostles always focused on Jesus’ death,
burial and resurrection as the basis for the good news that forgiveness is offered through faith in Him. Knowledge of the Old Testament prophets provided the background and basis for the dramatic and seemingly immediate response by the people. The early preachers repeatedly said, “This is what was spoken by the prophet.” Acts 3:24 records Peter’s words: “Indeed, all the prophets from Samuel on, as many as have spoken, have foretold these days.” Girdwood sums up his point, writing (p. 109), “The focus was on Jesus, not on prophecy.”

It was this focus on Messiah that made the Old Testament prophets so valuable to the fledgling church. Christians in the first century had only the Old Testament writings and the verbal testimony of the apostles as a basis for their faith in Jesus. Girdwood discusses fourteen reasons why the Old Testament prophets were – and are – so valuable.

1. **God Controls History.** Fulfilled prophecy proved that God controls history. He knows all about the past and the future and would cause to happen what he wanted to happen.
2. **Recognition of Messiah.** The prophets described the coming Messiah so fully that when Jesus came he could be recognized as the One.
3. **Announced Arrival of the Kingdom.** Since the Messiah was the king sent from God, his coming meant that the long awaited kingdom of God had arrived. Furthermore, they said King Jesus is reigning now. The church’s task of carrying out the Great commission is kingdom work.
4. **Identified the Last Days.** This new era under the Messiah was called “the last days.” Acts 2 identifies the day of Pentecost, when the gospel was first preached, as “in the last days.” This time is the grand climax of God’s redemptive plan, the end time in earth history to which the prophets pointed.
5. **God’s People Are a Spiritual People.** Foreshadowed the Spiritual Israel. The nature of the people of God has changed. The physical nation in Palestine has been replaced by the spiritual nation of faith.
6. **Prepared for Gentile Inclusion.** Gentiles in large numbers were soon grafted into their spiritual nation and are now children of Abraham by faith.
7. **Prepared for a New Covenant.** God has set up a new covenant to replace the old one.
8. **Christians in View.** In the prophets’ writing much is specifically for Christians.
9. **Clear to All.** The prophets’ message was clear to both Jews and non-Jews.
10. **Agreement with Apostles.** Paul’s defense before non-Christian authorities showed that Christianity agreed with the message of the prophets.
11. **Nature of God.** The prophets help us know the nature and behavior of God.
12. **Exposed Sin.** The prophets assessed behavior. They exposed sin.
13. **Literary Level.** The high literary level of the prophets is consistent with what we would expect from someone through whom the Almighty God delivered his messages.
14. **Psychological Benefit.** There is a wonderful psychological benefit in reading the prophets.

**PREDICTIVE PROPHECY IS EVIDENCE THAT GOD CONTROLS HISTORY.**

The prophets predicted things – some centuries prior to fulfillment – about which they could never anticipate, much more control.

- Egyptian bondage and deliverance (Gen. 15:7-16)
- Reign of Josiah 300 yrs. later (1 Ki. 13:1-2)
- Messianic prophecies, some of which are very specific (next section)
  Correct predictions by themselves did not guarantee that a prophet was from God (Deut. 13:1-4).

The message of a prophet must be consistent with the rest of the Bible message.

Contrast the unreliable predictions of modern day seers to the precise and perfect fulfillment of Bible prophecy, verifying God's control of history.

**PROPHECIES OF MESSIAH MADE HIM READILY RECOGNIZABLE.**

- His place of birth in Bethlehem was predicted. (Micah 5:2; Matt. 2:1-6; Lk. 2:15-20)
- The unusual birth from a virgin (Isaiah 7:14; Matt. 1:18-25)
- There would be a wonderful messenger to prepare the way for the Messiah. (Malachi 3;1; Matt. 11:1-14; Mk. 1:2)
- His ministry would be centered in “Galilee of the Gentiles, by the way of the sea, along the Jordan.” (Isaiah 9:1-2; Matt. 4:12-17) Herbert Wolf reminds us that “Capernaum lay on a highway called by the Romans the Via Maris, ‘the way of the sea.’”
When John the Baptist was in prison, he sent two disciples to ask Jesus whether he was really the Messiah. Jesus sent them back to John, reminding him of the many miracles He did that the prophets said would accompany the Messianic era (Isaiah 35:5-6; Matt. 11:1-6). After reading Isaiah 61:1-2 in the synagogue at Nazareth, Jesus said, “Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing” (Lk. 4:14-22). Nicodemus recognized that these miracles indicated the Jesus had come from God (Jn. 3:1-2).

Jesus’ suffering and death (Psalm 22; Isaiah 50:6; 52:13-53:12)

These prophecies about Jesus are all the more amazing when contrasted with the lack of prophecy in the other major faiths of the world (e.g., no predictive prophecy re: Buddha, Confucius). See Lk. 24:25-27, 45; Jn. 5:39-40, 46-47.

FULFILLED PROPHECY OF THE COMING KING SHOWS THAT THE KINGDOM HAS COME.

Isaiah 9:6-7 says this king would rule over a never-ending kingdom.
The angel told Mary her child would reign forever on the throne of his father David (Lk. 2:30-33).
See also Matt. 12:28; 24:14; Acts 2:33-36.

THE PROPHETS TELL US ABOUT THE LAST DAYS.
The prophets indicate that the Messianic era would be the last days.

- Hosea 3:5 foretells the return of Israel to seek the Lord their God and David their king, a reference to Messiah, in “the last days.”
- Isaiah 2:2-4 and Micah 4:1-5 describes these “last days” when all the nations will stream to Zion, the mountain of the Lord; that is to say Jerusalem. The reference is to the church, which began in Jerusalem on Pentecost, and the fact that both Jew and non-Jew would enter.
- The New Testament identifies “the last days” with the new era which Jesus brought.
  - Peter said the events in Acts 2 took place in the last days to which Joel referred (Acts 2:14-17).
  - The Hebrew writer (1:1-4) refers to the current age as the last days, in which God has spoken to us in His Son.
  - Peter (1 Pet. 1:18-20) says that though Jesus was chosen before the creation of the world to be our sacrifice, “he was revealed in these last times for your sake.”
  - 1 John 2:18 John refers to the end of the first century as the last times, in which many antichrists had appeared.
  - Hebrews 9:26 says Jesus “has appeared once for all at the end of the ages . . .”
  - At the end of the first century the apostle John referred to it as “the last hour” in which many antichrists had already come.
  - Paul reminded the Corinthian Christians that what had happened to God’s people in the exodus from Egypt and the wilderness wandering were recorded as warnings for us, on whom the fulfillment of the ages has come” (1 Cor. 10:11). The church era, which extends from the crucifixion to Jesus’ return, is the last. All who have lived in the last 2,000 years have lived in the last days.

THE PROPHETS SHOW THAT GOD’S PEOPLE ARE A SPIRITUAL PEOPLE.
God has never been pleased with mere external behavior. Instead, He has always wanted the hearts of people to be close to Him.

- Isaiah 1:10-20 God decried their practice of “trampling my courts,” “bringing meaningless offerings” and “evil assemblies.” God despised their token performance of rituals that revealed only an external religion. He wanted their allegiance and love, not their dead bulls and goats!
- Joel 2:12-13 “Return to me with all your heart . . . rend your heart and not your garments.”
- Ezekiel 11:19; Jeremiah 24:7

The prophets foretold of a covenant people or nation that was neither of physical parentage nor defined by geographic boundaries. Girdwood explains that “it would be appropriate, then, to view the Old Testament system more as a guide for governing a physical nation; whereas the New Testament is a guide for the spiritual nation, the people of God under the Messiah. All enter this spiritual nation by faith, by a new birth into a spiritual family.” (p. 119)

THE PROPHETS FORESAW GOD’S KINGDOM INCLUDING NON-JEWS

As a spiritual nation (#5), non-Jews become equal children of Abraham by faith.
- Isaiah 19:16-25 Egypt, Assyria and Israel worship together
- Isaiah 2:2-4 All nations will stream to the mountain of the Lord’s house.
- Isaiah 49:6 speaks of the Gentiles being saved.
- Isaiah 56:3-8 God said He would gather others besides those already gathered.
• Hosea 1:10; 2:23  In Romans 9 Paul reminds us that this describes Gentiles who become Christians.

A NEW COVENANT REPLACES THE OLD

The prophets spoke of a new covenant. Jeremiah 31:31-34 is the most well-known description of this covenant, especially as contrasted with the old.

• The new covenant would create internal realities in the minds and hearts of his people, not just external regulations.
• The new covenant would include only those who know God. One entered the old covenant at his physical birth, but entrance in the new covenant is predicated upon a spiritual birth. Under the old covenant, the people had to be taught about God as they grew up. But the new covenant is entered into by choice after one knows God.

THE PROPHETS HAD CHRISTIANS IN MIND

Peter wrote that the prophets were not serving themselves but Christians (1 Peter 1:10-12).

• Jeremiah, when he wrote about the new covenant
• Joel, when he wrote about the outpouring of the Holy Spirit
• Isaiah, as he wrote about the child to be born – the Messiah

Paul wrote, “Everything that was written in the past was written to teach us, so that through endurance and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope” (Romans 15:4).

• To help his friends in Corinth Paul reminded them that Israel rebelled and was punished. Read 1 Cor. 10:11-13.
• “Do you need encouragement to endure a difficult situation? Do you need a reason to hope? Do you need a warning against complacency? Ten read the prophets.” – (Girdwood, p. 123)

THE PROPHETS’ MESSAGE WAS CLEAR TO BOTH JEWS AND NON-JEWS.

“The captivity of the northern and southern kingdoms of the Jews spread them and their writings all over the lands of the east.” – (Girdwood, p. 124) Consequently,

• Magi from the east came all the way to Jerusalem to see the baby king of the Jews, having learned about his star (Numbers 24:17).
• The expectation of a Messiah is so strong in Judaism that it has spawned a large number of would-be Messiahs.
• Even the Samaritans expected the Messiah to come, as evidenced by the woman at the well (John 4:25).

CHRISTIANITY AGREED WITH THE MESSAGE OF THE PROPHETS

Paul, who knew the Old Testament very well, testified in his own defense before the non-Christian authorities, affirming the fact that what he preached concerning Jesus was the same message preached by the prophets concerning the Messiah. (Acts 26:6-7, 16-18, 22-23; 22:2-5)

THE PROPHETS HELP US KNOW THE NATURE AND BEHAVIOR OF GOD.

In the first chapter of Isaiah alone we learn that “God speaks, understands, sees, feels, controls both rewards and punishments, cares about the vulnerable, reasons and remembers. He knows how people feel. He hurts when they hurt. He lets people choose whether to follow him or go their own way. He is pure, just, almighty, restrained. He hates empty rituals; rather he wants a personal relationship with people. He expects a response to his law. He offers cleansing. He hears prayer, but refuses to hear the prayers of the empty-hearted. His communication with man is very picturesque, full of bold imagery. He will change the future. He will eventually purge away and punish the worthless ones but will bring much good to his people.” (Girdwood, p. 125-126)

THE PROPHETS ASSESSED BEHAVIOR AND EXPOSED SIN.

Amos 2:6-7; Micah 6:8; Hosea 4:1-3; Zechariah 7:8-10

THE PROPHETS COMMUNICATE AT A VERY HIGH LITERARY LEVEL.

They used bold imagery and various literary techniques and devices (e.g., hyperbole, simile, alliteration) to strengthen their message and to engage the reader.

THERE IS WONDERFUL PSYCHOLOGICAL BENEFIT IN READING THE PROPHETS.

“Prophecy touches our inner heart, challenging and assisting us in wholesome living. In his book, Basic Bible Interpretation, Zuch says prophecy comforts, calms, converts, cleanses, compels, and clarifies... God stirred the prophets to write the message he wanted all believers to use from that day forward. So much of the prophets lift our imagination to see what god intended for all his people under the golden age of the Messiah. Now that the One has come we can read the prophets with the increased vision of hindsight.” (Girdwood, p. 129)
CONCLUSION

“It may be clear by now that this author’s analysis of the prophets is heavily influenced by how the New Testament uses them. This view assumes that the Holy Spirit prompted both the Old Testament writers and the New Testament writers. Further, it assumes that the Holy Spirit not only prompted that they write, but guided what they wrote. It is a short step to think that the New Testament is the one inspired guide to the way the Holy Spirit intended the Old Testament to be used.

If this is so, a diligent follower of Jesus would want to fill his mind with the way the New Testament understands the Old Testament. He will want to examine all the Old Testament passages clearly quoted by the New Testament. He will intend to interpret these quite like Matthew and John, Peter and Paul, and Jesus. The message they wrote about Christ in the New Testament books is the same message they preached and taught about him in the synagogues. This was the message that launched the church. The same Old Testament texts that they used to reason about Jesus we should use to reason about Jesus. The Christian Bible is not Matthew through Revelation, but Genesis through Revelation.”

SUGGESTIONS FOR STUDYING PROPHECY
1. Read the Bible itself in large sections to get the big picture, the context.
2. Let the prophets use normal language. Sometimes they use plain, straightforward language. But they also use figurative, picturesque language.
4. Be cautious about clever new “insights.”
5. Always look for a writer’s presuppositions. They will influence their explanation or interpretation.