Prophets Resources

# Prophecy in Matthew 1:18—4:16

1. There are varying relationships between Matthew’s use of the prophecies and their meaning in their context. At one end, Micah 5:2 is indeed a promise of a future king, so there is nothing unreasonable about Matthew’s using the passage in connection with the one whom he knows to be the king God has now give. At the other end, Hosea 11:1 is not a prophecy at all, in the sense of a declaration about the future. In terms of the link between the passages’ meaning in their context and the significance Matthew attaches to them, the others come somewhere in between.
2. If Matthew were trying to prove something (e.g., to prove to Jews that Jesus is the Messiah), his use of the prophecy would hardly work. But Matthew is not trying to prove who Jesus is to people who don’t believe in him. He is trying to help believers understand Jesus in light of the scriptures. He is setting Jesus in the context of the scriptures and using them to interpret Jesus. The line between prophecy and Jesus goes from Jesus to prophecy and back, not from prophecy to Jesus and back.
3. It’s possible to suggest that there are typological links between the prophecies and Jesus. E.g., Jesus’ going down to Egypt corresponds to Israel’s going down to Egypt. Jesus repeats Israel’s story; Israel’s story anticipates Jesus’ story. I myself find this kind of argument forced.
4. The same applies to the suggestion that this approach to prophecy finds its fuller sense or fuller meaning or spiritual menaing. I don’t think it’s finding prophecy’s fuller sense. What it is doing is finding the prophecy’s significance for a question or need we have. It’s useful to keep that distinction between a passage’s own meaning, which was given by the Holy Spirit, and its significance for now, which can also be given by the Holy Spirit.
5. I have had a number of experiences of God using scripture to say something to me that is nothing much to do with its original meaning. It seems simpler to me to assume that this is what Matthew is doing. It is simply the words of the prophecy that illumine Jesus. The original context is irrelevant. But using scriptural words does imply that the point being made is a scriptural one.
6. When I have had scripture used to me in that way that ignores its context, there’s no way of proving that this interpretation comes from God. You have to weigh it an test it, as you weigh and test alleged prophecies. In other words, it’s the original meaning that is definitely the spiritual sense. The alleged modern application may be a spiritual sense or may not.
7. Thus interpreting scripture in that intuitive, context-independent way is okay some of the time, but not all of the time. We need the more contextual approach in order to enable us to listen to what God did once say and let that resource us in the present and test what people suggest God is saying now.

# Interpreting Prophecy: Pre-modern, Modern, Post-modern

**Pre-modern**

Before, during, and for1500 years after NT times, people instinctively interpreted scripture in light of questions raised by their own context. There was no difference between (e.g.) NT and Qumran interpretation of scripture. The Qumran monks believed they were fulfilling Isaiah 40 by preparing the way of the Lord in the wilderness. Matthew believed that John was fulfilling Isaiah 40 by preparing the way of the Lord in the wilderness. Both might have been right—scripture can have several fulfillments (fillings or fillings out or meeting its goal (*plero-o*, *tele-o*). They started from their faith conviction (e.g., Jesus is the “Messiah,” or the Qumran community leader is the “Righteous Teacher”) and looked at scripture in light of it. This did not pre-determine what they saw in scripture. It did mean their angle of vision determined the *kind* of thing they would see. And it meant that their interpretation would be unlikely to convince someone who did not agree with their faith starting point. Over subsequent centuries, Jews and Christians continued this process of interpretation. One presupposition of their use of scripture was that as an inspired word it could have a number of significances—it had that kind of potential in it. When God speaks on the basis of Scripture, it may have nothing to do with the text’s contextual meaning.

**Modern**

The Reformation was, among other things, an argument about the interpretation of scripture. It was not the case that the mediaeval church ignored scripture—it was rather the case that the Reformers thought that the medieval church (including contemporaries such as Erasmus) misinterpreted it. As Luther saw it, people treated scripture as if it had a wax nose—it could be twisted to any shape you wanted. But (he affirmed) it must be read in accordance with its intrinsic meaning. The Reformation’s stress on scripture thus has priorities in common with the development of historical-critical exegesis within modernity, with its stress on the literal meaning, the importance of history, and the need to be critical of what tradition said that scripture meant. But in order to work out the implications of these emphases, modernity neglected or opposed the idea that scripture can speak to people direct, without consideration for its literal meaning. Second, it neglected the text as we have it, in favor of its earlier versions and/or the events it refers to. And third, it was critical of scripture itself, and not just of traditional interpretation of scripture.

**Post-modern**

Post-modern interpretation is not a mere reversion to the pre-modern. It is an attempt to take seriously the positive aspects to both, in such a way as to safeguard against their negative aspects. So it will allow for the fact that the Holy Spirit sometimes inspires imaginative leaps in the use of scripture, which give the words a significance that has nothing much to do with their meaning in their context. But it will not make that a default assumption about the nature of interpretation, for reasons that emerged in the context of the Reformation and the Enlightenment. That is, such use of scripture could be a means of declaring things that are unscriptural, and we need means of being able to argue about whether this is a word from the Lord. Or it can be a means of simply confirming us in what we already believe, and not allowing God to break through. If it does not correspond to the text’s original meaning, we need to treat it as we would a purported prophecy—be open to its coming from the Spirit, but also aware that most prophecy is either false or trivial.

# Lenses for Looking at the Prophets

There are two sorts of angles from which we can read the prophets (or other parts of scripture). We may want simply to discover what they were saying in their context—in other words we are doing exegesis. Or we may want to discover what they might say beyond their context, and what they might say to us—which involves hermeneutics. (Admittedly, in some ways this is an artificial distinction. We do exegesis because we are interested in the text, and the nature of our interest influences what we see there. And when we come to the text to discover what it says to questions that concern us, this can lead to exegetical discoveries.)

In coming to see what the text says to us, consciously or unconsciously we put on lenses. These bring aspects of the text into focus for us. Probably no lens brings the whole text into focus (and some lenses may put the whole text out of focus). We need to try several lenses if we are to see the implications of different parts of a book. The NT offers us a number of lenses through which to read the prophets. For any passage, try asking which of these lenses “works”—brings the text into focus.

*The “Jesus” lens.* This is modern Christians’ default lens, the lens the first Christians used when they wanted to use the Prophets to help them to understand who Jesus was and to understand the significance of his ministry, death, and resurrection—particularly when these were difficult to understand. See e.g., Matt 1:17—2:23. But this lens seems to illumine only two per cent of the Prophets. So the fact that Christians often assume that telling us about Jesus is *the* point about the prophets means we then have a problem. What do we do with the rest, which seems irrelevant? Fortunately it was not the NT’s only lens.

*The “church” lens.* From Isaiah the first Christians discovered what the church is and what it is called to be. The vision of a suffering servant in Isaiah 53, which Christians see as quintessentially about Jesus, also offers the New Testament writers insight about the church (see e.g., Phil. 2:5-11; 1 Peter 2:21-24).

*The “ministry and mission” lens.* It was the servant testimony in Isaiah 49:1-6 that helped Paul understand the nature of his own mission and ministry (see Acts 13:47; Gal. 1:15). Paul’s implicit question is “How may we understand our ministry and mission,” and Isaiah 49:1-6 provides him with an answer.

*The “spiritual life” lens.* When Jesus composed his Blessings (Matt. 5:3-11), most were based on the Psalms and Isaiah.

*The “Israel” lens.* The NT also applied the “Israel” lens. Jesus did so in applying Isaiah 6:9-10 to the community of his day (Mark 4:12), and also did so with Isaiah 5:1-7 (Mark 12:1-12). He applies Isaiah 29:13 to its leadership in particular (Mark 7:6-7), and does the same in bringing Isaiah 56:7 and Jeremiah 7:11 together (Mark 11:17). Paul discovers from Isaiah how to understand the significance of Israel (e.g., Rom 9:27-33)

*The “world” lens.* As John looks at the nations and their destiny in Revelation, there is hardly a verse that would survive if we removed the allusions to books such as Isaiah and Ezekiel.

*The “End” lens.* Jesus also applies the “End” lens to Isaiah. In describing the End that he anticipates in Mark 13:24-25, he takes up the language of Isaiah 13.