

PREDICTIVE TEXTS? HOW IS OLD TESTAMENT PROPHECY FULFILLED?

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A QUICK WORD ON WHAT WE MEAN BY 'FULFILMENT'

The Bible speaks of 'fulfilment' usually in terms of 'filling,' in the way we 'fill out' a form or 'fill up' a venue by selling all the seats – something is finished because there is nothing more to add. Jesus used the word 'fill' in a similar way to say that the time was 'full' and the Kingdom had arrived (Mk 1:15): the last grain of sand had dropped through the hourglass and there was no more waiting. A helpful comparison might be when we speak of 'fulfilling' a promise: this gives the idea of a word spoken in the past which needs to be 'filled' in the present or future in order to be complete.

FULFILMENT IN CHRIST

Jesus taught us to expect and to look for the fulfilment of Old Testament prophecy in him. During his life on earth, he sometimes pointed out when scripture was being fulfilled (e.g. Luke 4:21; Jn 13:18; 17:12). He also put it more strongly: Scripture *had* to be fulfilled (Mt 26:54; Mk 14:49; Lk 24:44). The fulfilment of Scripture authenticated Jesus' ministry and his claims: if his life did not conform to the prophetic hope as recorded in Scripture, he could not be the Messiah (John 5:39, 45-47; cf. Matthew 11:4-6). In this sense, Jesus was not a 'free agent': he was bound not just by the Father's will, but by the pattern laid out for his birth, life, ministry, death and resurrection in Scripture (the Old Testament). See also Matt 5:17-18; Luke 6:17; 21:33

On the first Easter Sunday, Jesus took his disciples through the Old Testament, showing them where his life and ministry, betrayal, sufferings and death, resurrection, and the proclamation of the gospel are spoken of (Luke 24:44-47). There is evidence that after the resurrection, the 'penny dropped' for the disciples about the fulfilment of Old Testament Scripture (see John 2:22; 12:16), through the help of the Holy Spirit (John 16:12). We can get some idea of which passages he took them to by looking at the Old Testament Scriptures quoted by the apostles in the Book of Acts. And the gospel-writers comment many times that certain things happened 'in order that it (the scripture) might be fulfilled ...' (e.g. Matt 1:22; 2:15, 17; 8:17; 12:17; 13:35; 21:4; 27:9, 35; Mark 15:28; John 12:38; 15:25; 18:9; 19:24, 36). These observations may also derive from Jesus' teaching about the fulfilment of OT prophecy in him.

Peter gives us another perspective on this: the Spirit of Christ was at work in the Old Testament prophets when they foretold the 'sufferings of Christ and the glories that would follow' (1 Pet 1:11-12). In other words, Jesus' life and ministry, death, resurrection and glorification had to conform to the pattern which he, the Eternal Son, had inspired the prophets to write about many centuries before. This says something profound and important about the Old Testament: God did not 'scrap' the Old Testament and start again with the New; he *fulfilled* the Old Testament in Christ.

It is also important to recognise that the Old Testament itself expects to be fulfilled. It contains many promises about the future. For example: God's covenant with Abraham (Gen 12, 15, 17, 22); his promise to rescue Israel from Egypt (Exod 3:8); promises about the restoration of Israel after the Exile (Deut 30); the everlasting dynasty of David (2 Sam 7 / 1 Chr 17). Prophetic prediction is part of this broader expectation of fulfilment.

PROPHECY IS MORE THAN PREDICTION

Although in everyday speech 'prophecy' has come to mean 'prediction,' there was much more to the OT prophets' task than foretelling future events. The prophets were 'covenant executors,' calling the wayward

people of God (and their leaders) back to exclusive faith in Yhwh. Their role was to speak God's word into situations, giving God's perspective or judgment or promise according to circumstances, confronting the faithless and comforting the faithful.

1. Prophecy included prediction

At times, prophetic ministry *included* the prediction of future events, showing that God knows the end from the beginning and is in control. The blueprint for the prophetic role is given in Deuteronomy 18:14-22, which promises a succession of prophets like Moses in Israel. Accurate prediction of future events is seen as a distinguishing mark of the true (as opposed to false) prophet. But we need to be clear about what we mean by 'prediction.'

2. Not all prediction is prophecy

In 1973, I picked a horse to win the Grand National. I knew absolutely nothing about horse racing (and still don't), but I liked the name – 'Red Rum.' Not only did Red Rum win the Grand National that year, but also in 1974 and 1977 (coming second in the intervening years). I had picked arguably the greatest racehorse of all time, but it was a fluke. I was a schoolboy. I had no special or spiritual insight. At the time, I was not a Christian. It was certainly not a prophecy. To call something a 'prophecy,' there must be other things than mere prediction.

3. Predictive prophecy brings about the future

Let's consider three biblical examples, two from the Old Testament and one from the New.

- i. Joshua 6:26: Joshua 'predicts' that anyone who rebuilds the city of Jericho will do so at the cost of the death of two of his sons. This 'came true' centuries later, when Hiel of Bethel suffered this fate (1 Kings 16:34). Joshua's prophecy was not merely the prediction of a future event. It was the pronouncement of a curse (Josh 6:26). It was a word which made a future event happen.
- ii. Jeremiah 'foretold' the death of the false prophet, Hananiah (Jer 28:15). This happened within a couple of months. Again, it was not just an accurate 'prediction,' but a pronouncement of judgment from God and a word which in some way caused the future event.
- iii. In Luke 1:20, the angel Gabriel declares that Zechariah (John the Baptist's father) will be unable to speak from that moment until the birth of his son. This is both a rebuke and a sign.

In all these cases, it is clear that predictive prophecy is more than just foretelling things before they happen. It is a word from God which brings about an outcome. Scholars use the term 'speech-acts' for words that function like actions because they achieve things, cause effects or shape destinies. The most obvious example of this is when God says 'let there be ...' in the six days of creation in Genesis 1. See also Isa 55:11: God's word does not return to him empty but brings about what he desires. These are words that *do*. Prophecies about the future do not just predict the future: in some way they make the things they predict happen.

4. Some Prophecies Are Conditional

Building on the idea of prophetic predictions as words which produce effects, we also need to reckon with predictions in the Old Testament which do *not* come about. One example of this is Isaiah's prophecy of Hezekiah's imminent death (Isa 38:1-8). Another is Jonah's prophecy against the city of Nineveh (3:4), 'yet forty days and Nineveh will be overthrown.' Nineveh was *not* overthrown, which made Jonah incandescent with rage. And yet, it was also what Jonah had expected, based on what he knew of the character of Yhwh as declared in Exod 34:6,7 (Jonah 4:2). In other words, Jonah understood that the prophecy of Nineveh's doom was conditional on the response of its king and inhabitants. This prophecy was a speech-act

same way. One is what we might call a 'literal' prediction, but the others are more about Old Testament themes or motifs fulfilled in Jesus' life. This is precisely Matthew's intention: his Gospel presents Jesus as the new 'Israel' who succeeded where the nation of Israel had failed, and through faith in whom we can become citizens of God's kingdom. This explains his use of Hosea 11. His use of Jeremiah 31:15 is more along the lines of 'this is like that,' which was a common way of drawing parallels between events, in First-Century Jewish thought, and of demonstrating the significance of events according to patterns or parallels in how God works in history. Matthew's rich and varied understanding of fulfilment makes it worth looking again at his use of Micah 5:2.

A second look at Micah 5:2-5a

Although we may regard this as an example of pin-point prediction accurately fulfilled in the person of Jesus, there is more going on in Micah 5 and Matthew 2. The Old Testament does not merely give us the location (GPS coordinates) of the Messiah's birth. The point is not to identify the place but to make us ask, "Why there?" The significance of Bethlehem is that it is where David came from and that the promised ruler of Israel is therefore a Davidic king. In other words, as David's greater son, Jesus *had* to be born in Bethlehem because that location speaks of his destiny. It is another case of 'this is like that': just as David was born in Bethlehem, the messianic Son of David must also be born there. The fulfilment of Micah 5:2 in Jesus' birth is therefore a statement about his identity, not just an arbitrary geographical location accurately predicted.

In Matthew's use of the Old Testament, we see that the New Testament writers assumed that their readers would know the Old Testament Scriptures, and that they would also understand that the fulfilment of OT prophecy is rich and varied, not simply a case of the accurate prediction of future events. When we consider the fulfilment of prophecy, therefore, we should also be looking for the fulfilment of OT themes in Christ and the church, and the answer to the questions which the OT raises but does not answer. For the full 'nutritional value and enjoyment' of Old Testament prophecy, we need to understand there is great richness in the way that Jesus fulfils OT prophecy: predictions, themes, theology and the answer to questions.

Here is one example of how Jesus answers the questions left hanging in the Old Testament. In Exodus 34:6,7 God declares himself to be 'merciful and gracious', 'forgiving sin' and yet not letting the guilty go unpunished. This understanding of the character of Israel's God is fundamental to the Old Testament and resurfaces at many key moments in the Old Testament. And yet the question of *how* God can both *forgive* and *punish* guilt is never resolved. It remains a tension throughout the OT. John almost certainly had Exodus 34:6 in mind when he described Jesus (in 1:17) as 'full of grace and truth' (which is one way of expressing 'merciful and gracious' in Greek). He is pointing to the resolution of the tension, in Christ. And Paul states very simply that it is through the 'redemption that is in Christ' and his propitiatory death, that God can be both *just* and the *justifier* of the one who has faith in Jesus (Rom 3:21-26), that is punish sin and yet forgive sinners.

Other questions unresolved at the end of the OT era include: God's election of Israel as part of a plan for the whole world; the success of God's plan of salvation in the light of human failure; the triumph of the promised Davidic king in the light of the failure of Judah's kings and the end of the monarchy at the exile. All find their resolution in Christ.

A brief word about typology

Typology is another way in which Jesus fulfils the OT. It is too complex a topic to be considered here.

There is legitimate biblical typology and there is also fanciful typology in which almost anything in the OT can be made to point to Christ (e.g. anything made of wood becomes a picture of the cross). Wanting to preach Christ from the OT is laudable, but we must be wary of typological interpretations of the OT that do violence to the plain meaning of the text as it would have been understood by the first readers/hearers. Often there is greater or deeper meaning than they would have understood, but a completely *different* meaning is doubtful. Finding typological meaning can be done at the expense of careful exegesis. Emphasis on the 'plain meaning' of Scripture is a Reformation distinctive. If a preacher or the author of a Christian book shows you something you have 'never seen in that text before,' your first question should be whether it is really there.

THE OLD TESTAMENT PREDICTING THE FUTURE

There is no doubt that the Old Testament looks to the future. But the same book, even the same chapter of an OT prophetic book might speak about the contemporary situation, as well as what will happen in the future. So how do we know when the Old Testament is looking beyond its own time to a future time? We can't always be certain, but often there are short phrases that indicate that what follows will take place in the future. They are sometimes called 'future-time indicators.' Some of these are:

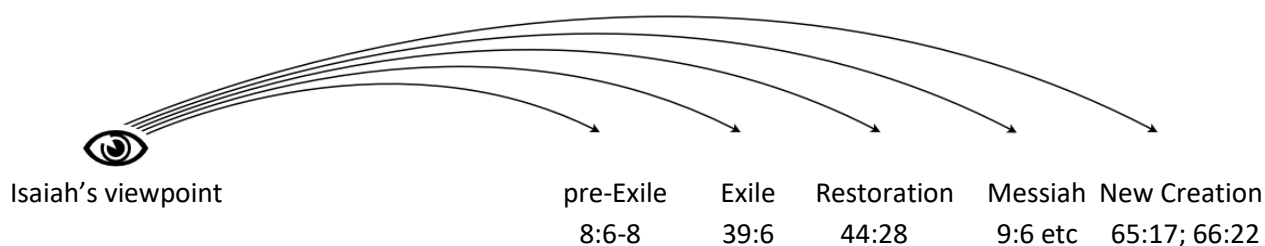
- 'in/on that day' (found over 100 times in prophetic books)
- 'in days to come' / 'in the latter days' / 'in the last days'
- 'the days are coming' (Jeremiah)
- 'Day of the LORD' passages, where judgment and salvation are combined in one momentous event.

Similarly, the Old Testament phrase 'do not be afraid' is very often followed by a promise of salvation or a saving act. Jesus' disciples would have known this and so when he said 'do not be afraid' to them, he was not merely concerned about their psychological state, he was encouraging them to expect salvation (so now re-read Matt 14:27; 28:10; Mk 5:36; Lk 1:13, 30; John 14:27 in the light of this).

Even if we are sure that an OT prophetic book is speaking about a future time, however, it may not be obvious which future time is in view. We could say that the Old Testament believer had more to look forward to, simply because it hadn't happened yet. Our privilege as Christians is to live in the time when the full revelation of God has been made known in the person of Jesus (Heb 1:1-3). So, when the New Testament looks forward to the future, it is usually describing the events surrounding the return of Christ, the Last Judgment and the new creation (sometimes the Fall of Jerusalem in AD 70 is in view). We call this 'eschatology' – what the New Testament teaches and what we believe about 'last things.' When we speak of 'Old Testament eschatology,' however, we mean something broader. The Old Testament *does* look forward to the end times, but it also looks forward to things which for us are now in the past.

Another way of describing this is to say that OT prophecy has more horizons of fulfilment. We can demonstrate these horizons from the prophecy of Isaiah, as follows:

Horizons in Isaiah



Isaiah 8:6-8 speaks of the Assyrian invasion of Israel, which would take place within Isaiah's own lifetime. 39:6, however, looks forward to the Babylonian exile which occurred about 100 years after Isaiah. 44:28 names Cyrus, ruler of Persia, who permitted the Jews to return to their homeland after the 70 years of exile. Several well-known passages speak of the first coming of Jesus, and towards the end of the book, there are some prophecies about a new creation. There is a general trend towards increasingly distant horizons of fulfilment as the book unfolds. The same is true of many other Old Testament prophetic books, such as Joel, where the focus begins close to the prophet's own time and then becomes increasingly distant. It is not a bad rule of thumb, therefore, to assume that the horizons become more distant (from the prophet's point of view) as the book progresses.

Now, some of the horizons in the view of the OT prophets don't mean very much to us. They are 'ancient history' and they don't seem to have much relevance to us now as Christians. Judah's Exile in Babylon, the decree of Cyrus and the Return from Exile, the re-building of the temple and the renewal of material prosperity to the land are 'so what' things for us. It is for that reason that Christian interpreters have often only looked for the fulfilment of OT prophecy in the first and second comings of Christ, and have overlooked or misread passages that deal with other important events in salvation history.

A Word on the Exile

Much OT prophecy looks forward to the joyful release of Israel from captivity at the end of the Exile. We can mistakenly assume that this was a historic event that took place shortly after the Decree of Cyrus (539 BC) that the Jews should return to their homeland from captivity in Babylon. From Ezra's prayer in Ezra 9:6-15 (and other passages in Ezra-Nehemiah), it is clear that the returned Jews still regarded themselves in Exile. More importantly, the way Jesus quoted OT prophecies indicates that he, like many Jews in the first century, regarded Israel as still in exile: although living in the land God promised, they were still under the oppression of a foreign power and were not under the rule of a Davidic king. Jesus taught that the only way out of 'exile' was through belief in him. OT prophecies about the end of exile, therefore, have a significant resonance for us today as we preach the gospel and call people out of exile and back to God.²

Multiple Horizons?

A further question we need to address is whether a single prophecy can actually be referring to more than one historical event. One example that is often given for this is Isaiah 61:1-2. Jesus quoted these verses in the synagogue in Nazareth, as being fulfilled on that very day (Luke 4:18-19). To be precise, however, he quoted only the first half of Isa 61:2, about the 'year of the Lord's favour.' It is often suggested that the second half of Isa 61:2, that speaks of the 'day of God's vengeance' will be fulfilled in Jesus' second coming (cf. 2 Thess 1:7-10). If that is the case, then the prophecy in Isaiah conflates the two events of Jesus' first and second comings and effectively collapses the history that lies between them. From Isaiah's perspective, two events seemed to be on the same horizon. From our perspective, we know they are separated by at least 2000 years.

A similar question is whether a single OT prophecy can have more than one horizon of fulfilment. For example, does the 'Immanuel' prophecy in Isa 7:14 have a fulfilment in Isaiah's own day as well as a final and ultimate fulfilment in the birth of Jesus (Matt 1:23)? Some would deny that this is possible, but there seems to be a clear case of multiple fulfilments in the 'Abomination of Desolation' prediction of Daniel

² On this, see Douglas S. McCOMISKEY, 'Exile and Restoration from Exile in the Scriptural Quotations and Allusions of Jesus,' *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*, 53.4 (2010), 673-696 – available online: see bibliography.

9:27, 11:31 and 12:11. In the first instance, this refers to the desecration of the Jerusalem Temple by Antiochus Epiphanes in 167 BC (recorded in the apocryphal books of 1 Maccabees 1:41-50; 2 Maccabees 6:1-6). At the same time, Jesus taught his disciples to expect the fulfilment of this in the near future (Matt 24:15), and the Roman destruction of the Temple in AD 70 seems to be in view. It is also possible that a final and ultimate fulfilment lies yet in the future, prior to Jesus' return. The multiple fulfilment of prophecies is consistent with the 'this is like that' idea that God acts in history according to patterns, so that we will recognise when he is at work.

LITERAL OR SYMBOLIC FULFILMENT?

One vexed question concerning the interpretation of Old Testament predictive prophecy is whether it should be taken literally or symbolically, or both! For example, will actual wolves and lambs lie down together and actual lions literally eat straw (Isa 65:25) or are these symbols of something else? There clearly is symbolic language in the Bible and it is usually clear from context when it is, such as when Jesus said 'I am the gate' (John 10:7). When it comes to predictive prophecy, however, it may not be so obvious. Let us take the example of the Immanuel prophecy of Isaiah 7:14, and its fulfilment in Christ. On the one hand, it is not 'literally' fulfilled because Jesus was not given the name 'Immanuel' – Joseph was told to give him the name 'Jesus' – but his fulfilment of the 'Immanuel' (= 'God with us') idea was far more profound than merely having been given that name. He fulfilled the substance of the prophecy – God was indeed with us – even though he was not actually given the name 'Immanuel.'

In simple terms, there are two approaches to the literal/symbolic question:

1. Everything that can be taken literally, should be taken literally (this would include the animals in Isaiah 65). This approach is typical of 'Dispensational' interpretation.
2. Promises made to Old Testament Israel are fulfilled spiritually in the church (and the animals of Isa 65 are symbols of something else). This approach is typical of 'Reformed' interpretation.

The 'Reformed' approach tends to emphasise continuity between the Old and New Testaments, whereas 'Dispensationalism' tends to emphasise discontinuity between them. Both continuity and discontinuity are true, of course. There is one God, one Bible and one eternal plan of salvation in Christ (continuity); at the same time, there is a 'new' covenant in Christ, a 'new and better way' of access into God's presence (discontinuity). Disagreements around the positions concern the details of what continues from the Old into the New covenant eras and what doesn't. The idea of 'fulfilment' is helpful in this respect: if things do not continue from one covenant into the next, it must be because they have been fulfilled in Christ, not because God has changed his mind and opted for 'plan B.' It is helpful to recognize which tradition of interpretation we have grown up with, which is the view of the leaders and preachers in our church, and the commentators whose books we read, so as to understand the reasons for the approach they take. If I think the wolves and lambs are 'obviously' literal or symbolic, this betrays the 'interpretative environment' in which I received my Christian teaching.

The 'Reformed' approach to theology is characteristic of many branches of evangelicalism in the UK, such as Grace Baptist Churches, Evangelical Presbyterian and Congregationalist churches and groupings, as well as the FIEC. Dispensationalism is much more prevalent in the USA (John MacArthur is one prominent dispensationalist you have probably come across), but is also found in the UK in Brethren circles and Pentecostal and some Charismatic groupings.

METHODOLOGY FOR INTERPRETING OLD TESTAMENT PROPHECY

Here are some guidelines.

1. Start with the nearest horizon. Always begin with the immediate context of the prophet's calling and circumstances and ask whether and how the prediction might address the issues of his day or the people to whom he ministered.
2. Consider all possible horizons. As Christians, we will tend to look first for messianic fulfilment in Christ, but we should give due consideration to other horizons as well.
3. Consider how the New Testament uses the passage, if it is quoted in the NT. Bear in mind, however, that the New Testament's use of an Old Testament passage may not be the only or definitive meaning of that text. For example, Isaiah 53:4 is quoted by Matthew (8:17) with reference to Jesus' healing ministry, whereas Isa 53:9 is quoted by Peter (1 Pet 2:22) with reference to Jesus' sufferings. Similarly, Habakkuk 2:4 is quoted to different effect by Paul in Rom 1:17 and Gal 3:11 from the use made of it by the writer of Hebrews in Heb 10:38. In the same way, Paul's use of Gen 2:24 in Ephesians 5:31 is different from the point Jesus makes from the same verse, in Matt 19:5.
4. Don't expect scientific precision in OT eschatological prediction. The 'Hendriksen' approach to prophecy described above tends to view predictions and their fulfilments as precise and unambiguous. This is often not the case.
5. All OT eschatology points to something about Christ. Even if we conclude that a particular OT verse or passage is not actually a prediction of Christ, we can still get to Christ from it through application of the general truth that all the themes of Scripture find their culmination in him.

CONCLUSIONS

- God is wonderfully unpredictable (Isa 55:8-9; 64:4 = 1 Cor 2:9) and yet has made himself predictable by declaring his character and announcing his plan of salvation beforehand.
- The written word of Scripture is fulfilled in the person of the living word, Jesus Christ.
- Jesus fulfils not only predictions, but the theological themes of the Old Testament and is the answer to its unanswered questions.
- The OT points to future events which are fulfilled on several historical horizons.
- The question we need to ask is not *whether* Scripture is fulfilled in Christ, but *how* it is fulfilled in Christ.
- The better we know the Old Testament, the more we will understand the richness of the New Testament presentation of Christ.

PRAISE, THANKSGIVING AND PRAYER

- Our God speaks! – the Christian faith is based on his revelation. (Heb 1:1-4)
- When God speaks, he acts: his word does not return to him empty, but achieves what he intended by sending it. (Isa 55:10-11)
- There is a plan and purpose to history, fulfilled in the person of Jesus Christ.
- We have the Scriptures in our own language in reliable translations.

- We pray that God would speak his life-changing word into our minds and wills through every exposure to his word.
- We pray for the proclamation of the good news throughout the world.
- We pray for a deeper, richer, fuller understanding of God's word.
- We pray for the work of Bible translation for those people-groups who do not have any part of the Bible in their own language.
- We pray 'come, Lord Jesus' (Rev 22:20).

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