

# **Verdict**

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## **The Spirit of Prophecy**

### ***Editorial Introduction***

In our generation, eschatology has become a major preoccupation of the Christian church. J. Dwight Pentecost suggests that eschatology is the battleground of today's theology. 1 Prophecies relating to end-of-the-world events are absorbing the attention of Christians as never before. Books on last-day events are legion. Some have become best sellers. It can be said that now, as at the time of Christ's first advent, the people were "waiting expectantly" (Luke 3:15).

One of the largest sections in the conservative branch of the church believes that Christ will return before the millennial age. This view, called premillennialism, does not defer the coming of Christ to the distant future but believes that His coming is "at the door." In the past, spokesmen for the great churches often ridiculed this feeling of Christ's imminent return as "sectarian." But it is now frequently acknowledged that this conviction was also shared by the first Christians.

The two basic types of premillennialism are the historicist and the futurist schools of prophetic interpretation. There are, of course, subdivisions of these viewpoints. The majority of futurists are dispensationalists. George Eldon Ladd, however, is a futurist but not a dispensationalist. Among the futurists are those who believe in a pre-tribulation, a mid-tribulation and a post-tribulation rapture of the church. 2

Both historicists and futurists have done much to revive the New Testament concept that the church is an eschatological community eagerly awaiting the great consummation. Historicism sees the book of Revelation as a prophecy of events

spanning the entire Christian dispensation, but with special emphasis on the events immediately preceding the Lord's coming. The historicist is eager to identify events in modern history which fulfill Bible prophecy, and impending events which are the prelude to the great day of God. The historicist uses the "signs of the times" to prove that we are "five minutes to midnight."

While historicism believes that the prophecies concerning Israel are fulfilled in the Christian church, futurism is more literalistic. To the futurist, Israel means Israel, and so he concentrates on events occurring in Palestine and the Middle East. He believes that prophecy provides an insight into what will happen in the near future. He is confident that in the Jewish nation he will soon witness (or has even now begun to witness) a series of rapid events associated with the end of this age.

Although a great deal of questionable apocalyptic speculation has characterized the sects, Fison admits that they have more life than the great churches in which an eschatological consciousness is dead. 3 William Hordern suggests that the sects perform a needed prophetic ministry to the Orthodox Church. 4

*Verdict* does not want to stifle the "prophetic spirit" which the sleeping Christian church may so sorely need. The prophetic spirit should not be silenced but purified of its speculative and unbiblical elements. Many evangelical Christians— both historicists and futurists— still interpret biblical prophecies in a frame-work inherited from the nineteenth century. But recent advancement in biblical science has made certain of the nineteenth-century arguments and systems of thought quite obsolete. A better knowledge of the way the Bible was written makes some of our former use of Bible prophecy untenable. The conservative Christian cannot act as though nothing has happened to change aspects of his prophetic heritage. We must discard the ignorant suspicion that anything which challenges our inherited belief system is "apostasy," "modernism," or "liberalism." Truth can afford to be reasonable and open.

In this issue of *Verdict* we shall explore aspects of biblical prophecy not clearly recognized by leading prophetic expositors of the last century. This is not done to censure them. It is we and not they who deserve censure if we refuse to keep pace with the increase in knowledge promised in the end times (Dan. 12:4). This issue of *Verdict* contends for a better use of prophecy and apocalyptic literature. It would be tragic if we failed to see the difference between the reliability of the Bible and reliability of our interpretations of the Bible. The first is not under question. The second certainly is.

Come, let us reason together.

R. D. B.

## Notes and References

1. See J. Dwight Pentecost. *Things to Come: A Study in Biblical Eschatology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing house. 1958).
2. See Dave MacPherson, *The Unbelievable Pre-Trib Origin* (Kansas City, Mo.: Heart of America Bible Society, 1973).
3. See J. E. Fison, *The Christian Hope: The Presence and the Parousia* (London: Longmans, Green & Co., 1954).
4. See William Hordern, *Christianity, Communism, and History* (New York: Abingdon Press, 1954), pp. 16-18.

# *The Spirit of Prophecy*

## The Poetic Element

Much Old Testament prophecy is written as poetry. Poetry expresses truth, but differently than scientific prose. We must not insist on reading the inspired poetry of the Old Testament with a scientific mind-set. As Graeme Goldsworthy says, "To test such language by the rules of scientific prose distorts and even destroys the truth within it." <sup>1</sup> Just because the Bible is an expression of infallible truth does not demand that we should read the poetic oracles of an oriental book as if they were the coldly scientific prose of a nineteenth- or twentieth century Westerner. Poetry is colorful, imaginative, romantic, and abounds in figures of speech. It speaks to the spirit as well as to the intellect. The Bible contains the greatest love story ever told— a story of the covenant between God and man. We read about election, wooing, betrothal, marriage, steadfast love, infidelity, separation, judgment, reunion and the triumph of the covenant. The spirit of this story cannot be captured by stolid prose. The Bible is not a dry theological treatise. The inspired authors resorted to poetry, to the language of love and to the deeper things of the human spirit. We do not even interpret modern poetry as literally as the stock market report. The damsel in the Song of Songs has a belly like a bag of wheat and a neck like the battle tower which looks toward Damascus. This is not a prophecy about the church's missionary prowess any more than it is a description of female anatomy. To treat such literature with cold propositional logic is like tearing the petals from a rose to see how they fit together. Love is more than chemistry and physics. And prophetic poetry is more than

propositional logic.

Often we are so intent on a literal analysis of the letter of Scripture that we miss its spirit. J. B. Phillips reported his moving experience in translating Revelation. Somehow he caught the spirit of the drama as he translated this marvelous book. 2 Appreciating Revelation or Isaiah 40-66 does not depend on knowing exactly what every symbol or figure of speech means. While careful investigation has its place, we should also read to enjoy and to be swept along by the mood and spirit of this inspired literature.

A high-school English teacher once commented that some of his pupils came from a very serious Christian background. He said they often had problems in literary comprehension because they did not have enough humor to appreciate the differences among irony, sarcasm, hyperbole and narrative. In reading the Bible, it is possible to be too "pious" for our own good. Some Christians are so concerned with "inerrancy," "literal fulfillment" and "propositional revelation" that they try to interpret the poetic oracles as if they were all coldly predictive narrative.

Says H. H. Rowley in *The Re-discovery of the Old Testament*:

When Deutero-Isaiah sang, "Every valley shall be exalted, and every mountain and hill shall be made low; and the crooked shall be made low and the rough places plain," he was using the language of poetry, and not seriously suggesting that this transformation should take place at the time of the return from captivity. Similarly, when we read in another passage: "The wilderness and the parched land shall be glad: and the desert shall rejoice, and blossom as the rose," and all the words that follow, we need find nothing more than a poetic ascription to nature of a mood that corresponds to the writer's spirit, and of a transformation that seems to him appropriate for so notable an occasion as the return of the exiles. 3

In her book, *Hebrew Life and Thought*, Louise Seymour Houghton said this about Old Testament poetry:

The difference between prose and poetry in any language is, however, made clearest, not by rhythm or metre or parallelism, or by any structural characteristic, but by imagery. We use figures in poetry which we may not use in prose. The imagery of Hebrew poetry is very remarkable. In no other literature in the world is it so daring, yet in no other is it so reverent. Forms of speech are used with reference to God which would seem impious if found elsewhere and it is very significant that we do not find them impious here. What other poet could dare to say, speaking of natural afflictions, pestilence, famine, and such like:

O thou sword of Jehovah, how long will it be ere  
thou are quiet?  
Gather thyself into thy scabbard! rest, be still!  
[Jer. 47:6]

The simplicity of the imagery is no less impressive. Metaphors of the most stupendous import are from the common arts of life. "Thou didst thresh the nations in anger," says Habakkuk; [Hab. 3:12.] and Joel cries: "Put ye in the sickle, for the harvest is ripe: tread ye, for the wine press is full, the vats

overflow, for their wickedness is great." [Joel 3:13.] "O thou my threshing, the corn of my floor," groans Isaiah, "that which I have heard from the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, have I declared unto you." [Isa. 21:10.]....

All sorts of inanimate objects are personified: "Let the earth hear;" "Give ear, O ye heavens;" "Let the hills hear thy voice;" "Let the sea roar, let the field exult, let the trees of the wood sing for joy." [Isa. 34:1; Deut. 32:1; Mic. 6:1; Ps. 96:11, 12.]

Very majestic are such personifications as picture Pestilence as marching before Jehovah, [Hab. 3:5.] Hades extending her throat and opening her insatiable jaws, [Isa. 5:14.] thunder as "the clangor of Jehovah." [Ps. 29:3, 4, 5, 7, 8, 9.] Such personifications as these throw some light upon what is called the anthropomorphism of Old Testament conception of God: far more of it is pure imagery than is generally supposed. Those who object to the biblical doctrine of God that he is there made "a magnified and non-natural man," do so without apprehending the poetic character of many of the statements about him. They are figurative; and people of trained minds should have no difficulty discerning this. The Bible descriptions of God are figurative, partly because figures give a more nearly just idea of things than abstract statements can do, and partly because the Hebrew language, like the vocabulary of a child, had no words for abstract ideas. 4

Apocalyptic literature— as in Zechariah, Daniel and Revelation— is a type of poetic drama. In his *Apocalyptic: Ancient and Modern* D. S. Russell says:

Its literary form, of course, is that of poetry and of a vivid and highly imaginative kind. To treat it as if it were cold prose, to be dissected and analysed and assessed, is to end up with a dead misshapen thing unworthy of the name of literature, far less of revelation. To appreciate its message, it is necessary to enter into the mind and mood of the writer, to gauge the depths of his feelings and to understand the medium he uses to express his deeply felt convictions. The fact that the medium is a form of writing which is stilted, exaggerated and often grotesque, should not blind us to the content of the message he is trying to convey. 5

A writer must decide the literary form he will employ. He may use ordinary prose, historical narrative, allegory (as in *The Pilgrim's Progress*), parable, poetry or apocalyptic. Apocalyptic is simply one of numerous literary devices a writer may use to convey his message.

## The Predictive Element

The prophets have often been regarded as prognosticators and their prophecies treated as a kind of magical prediction of future events. In this approach, the poetic oracles have been read as if they were mechanical predictions which matched actual events with scientific accuracy. By showing that even minute details of certain prophecies met their fulfillment in later events, expositors have tried to prove the infallibility and inerrancy of the Bible.

We must question such an approach to prophecy:

1. This approach is very rationalistic. Faith in the Bible is made to rest on the demonstration of its phenomenal aspects. But such a faith may be weakened when

the predicted events fail to happen. Candid investigation may also show that the expositor has bent evidence to support his interpretation. In the long run, farfetched and questionable interpretations do not strengthen faith in the Bible. The gospel is the best apologetic for the truth of the Bible.

2. Those who confidently expect prophecy to give them advance information on future events ought to remember that the people of God have always been surprised by the way God has actually fulfilled His Word. At the time of Christ's first advent the people of God had the Messianic prophecies of the Old Testament before them, but who actually understood future events? John the Baptist did not even understand the meaning of his own prophecies concerning the Messiah. Who anticipated an incarnation, a crucifixion and a resurrection? God's mighty act in Christ was an overwhelming surprise. Prophecy had foretold it all, but not as a blueprint of coming events. God's work in Christ was so great that it far transcended a literal reading of the prophecies. No one could possibly have understood what was about to happen on the basis of those prophecies. They could only understand the prophecies in the light of their surprising fulfillment— a fulfillment none were expecting.

Furthermore, the fulfillment of the Old Testament in Jesus of Nazareth was evident only to faith. It could not be discerned rationalistically. To most Jews it seemed ridiculous to suggest that a discredited "pretender," a crucified and disgraced itinerant preacher, was the fulfillment of the Old Testament promises about God's glorious purposes for Israel. When the fulfillment of the Old Testament occurred as an ignominious defeat, it required faith to see that all the prophets from Moses to Malachi had written about this event. Faith in the way prophecy is fulfilled is the same as faith in the gospel.

3. The prophecies of the Old Testament were not given as a photographic outline of the future. Rather, they described the future in terms of what had happened in the past. God pledged that He would act as He had in the past. Thus, Isaiah 40-66 describes the coming deliverance from Babylon the Exodus redivivus. The prophet strengthens faith in the coming deliverance by using such facets of the Exodus story as the drying up of the Red Sea, the water and manna in the wilderness and the pillar of cloud which guided Israel. Even the creation imagery, the Noahic flood imagery and the call of Abraham imagery are employed in the prophecies of the coming deliverance from Babylon. In other words, the prophets used history *typologically*. But in every type-antitype schema, they used both comparison and contrast. The new exodus would be like the first Exodus and unlike the first Exodus. Prophecy was not intended as an exact outline of the future. It was more of an impressionistic picture of the future. The poetic use of the past and the blending of the historical and eschatological dimensions made it impossible for Old Testament saints to outline coming events like some of us do today. They saw the past as a type of how God

would act. But they allowed for an element of surprise in the way He would actually fulfill His word. Pannenberg puts it well:

These promises point explicitly to new divine activity that will take place in the life of men in the future. God, however, continues to be absolutely free even with regard to his promises, which are very rarely fulfilled in the precise literal sense in which they were understood when they were first proclaimed. Despite this, the Israelites always regarded historical events as the fulfillment of God's earlier promises because they respected God's freedom to fulfill his promises in whatever way he liked. 6

In his book, *The Bible in an Age of Science*, Alan Richardson says:

We may, if we wish, speak of this kind of fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy in the New Testament as typological. But we must stress the fact that Old Testament prophecy is not primarily verbal, a matter of oracles concerning the future which were later seen to have been correct. It is the Old Testament history itself which is prophetic; it came increasingly to be understood by the prophets of Israel as carrying within itself the promise of that final salvation which it foreshadowed. Because God had given the sign in history that he was the Redeemer of his people, and because, being God, he must remain true to his covenant and promise, therefore he would not suffer them to be destroyed but would come amongst them once more and visit them with his salvation. It was not that the prophets were inspired to utter oracles about future events, like pagan seers peering into a crystal, but that they were inspired to understand God's action in the events of their people's history and in the crises of their own days, so that they could assert with confidence the pattern and plan of God's judgment and salvation in the time to come. Because God had revealed himself in action, they discerned, however dimly, the purpose of his great design. Thus there arose in Israel that unique phenomenon in the history of religion, a line of prophets who could interpret to those who would hearken what God was doing in their own days and what he would do hereafter: "since the day that your fathers came forth out of the land of Egypt unto this day, I have sent unto you all my servants the prophets, daily rising up early and sending them" (Jer. 7.25). Thus, history itself becomes prophetic; what God has done is the clue to what he will do. It is because of his dealings with his people in history, not as the result of speculation upon the being and attributes of God, that the Bible can declare him to be "a God full of compassion and gracious, slow to anger and plenteous in mercy and truth; keeping mercy (*hesed*) for thousands, forgiving iniquity, transgression and sin" (Ex. 34.6f.). It is because God's promise, implicit in his dealings with his people under the old Covenant, is fulfilled in the coming of Jesus and his Church that we can speak of biblical typology, a fulfillment of those historical type-situations (such as the Deliverance from Egypt), about which the Old Testament informs us, in the historical events which the New Testament declares. 7

4. The purpose of prophecy is to develop character rather than to give God's people specific information on what God is going to do in history. God tells us no more of the future than we need to know in order to live as we ought today. We must walk by faith and not sight. Much prophetic speculation is really an attempt to walk by sight. Prophecy is for the comfort of the believing community rather than for rationalistic proof to convince unbelievers that the Bible is the Word of God (1 Cor. 14:22).

5. The prophets were forth-tellers rather than foretellers. They wrote to evoke repentance, faith and patience. Rowley is correct when he says, "The prophet did not minister to idle curiosity as to the hidden events of the future." 8

6. Finally, one striking piece of evidence reveals that prophetic exposition has been misdirected. The prophecies were rarely fulfilled exactly as their literal reading might have indicated. Prophetic expositors once delighted to show that the actual overthrow of such cities as Babylon and Tyre matched the prophetic predictions in every detail. This was supposed to demonstrate the inerrancy and infallibility of the Bible. Such inerrancy and infallibility, however, depended on tampering with the evidence. It may come as quite a surprise to some steeped in "evangelical" traditions to discover that many details in these prophetic "predictions" cannot be matched with the historical facts. The "discrepancy" may be due to the poetic element, the typological element or the conditional element. Rowley says:

In the book of Joel we read: "And it shall come to pass afterward, that I will pour out my spirit upon all flesh; and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your old men shall dream dreams, your young men shall see visions: and also upon the servants and upon the handmaids in those days will I pour out my spirit. And I will show wonders in the heavens and in the earth, blood, and fire, and pillars of smoke. The sun shall be turned into darkness, and the moon into blood, before the great and terrible day of Yahweh come." [Joel ii., 28ff. (Heb. iii.1ff.)] The New Testament declares that this was fulfilled on the day of Pentecost, [Acts ii.16.] yet there is nothing to suggest that it was fulfilled in any literal sense. No mention is made of any turning of the sun into darkness or of the moon into blood. The fulfillment claimed was in the accession of spiritual power, and the contagious ecstasy of that great day. With such a clear example from the early Church of indifference to details, we may be delivered from the spirit that comes to the prophecies of the Old Testament with the preconceived idea that every detail must be fulfilled in literal fashion....

In predicting the fall of Babylon, a passage which stands in the book of Jeremiah, but which is commonly ascribed to another hand, says: "Yahweh hath stirred up the spirit of the kings of the Medes; because His device is against Babylon, to destroy it." [Jer. ii. 11.] Later in the same chapter we read: "Prepare against her the nations, the king of the Medes, the governors thereof, and all the deputies thereof... For the purposes of Yahweh against Babylon do stand, to make the land of Babylon a desolation, without inhabitant." [Jer. ii. 28.] The writer of these words clearly expected Babylon to fall to the Medes and to suffer destruction at their hands. A passage now found in the book of Isaiah presents a similar picture: "Behold I will stir up the Medes against them (sc. the Babylonians), which shall not regard silver, and as for gold, they shall not delight in it." [Isa. xiii. 17.] Of the sufferings of the men of the city this passage says: "Their infants also shall be dashed to pieces before their eyes, their houses shall be spoiled, and their wives ravished... And their bows shall dash the young men in pieces; and they shall have no pity on the fruit of the womb; their eye shall not spare children. And Babylon, the glory of kingdoms, the beauty of the Chaldaeans' pride, shall be as when God overthrow Sodom and Gomorrah." [Isa. Xiii. 16, 18.] These circumstantial prophecies were not exactly fulfilled. The Median kingdom had itself been swallowed up by the Persian ere Babylon fell, and when it fell it surrendered peacefully to the conqueror. There was no sack of the city and no destruction. The conqueror made it a royal residence, and it continued to exist for many centuries. It is true that then it became a memory of the past, and ceased to exist as a living city. But that was through no attack of the Medes, and in no sense a fulfillment of this ancient prophecy. Yet again, while we can find no literal fulfillment of this expectation, we can find its substantial fulfillment. For Babylon, the proud ruler of kingdoms, exercised but a short-lived sway, and her empire was swallowed up in the Persian Empire. As the mistress of Israel's world she ceased to be, and whether she fell to Mede or to Persian was not the vital matter. 9

In his essay *Messianic Prophecies in Apologetics*, Bruce Vawter says:

Whatever is to be said of the charism of prophecy in the abstract, it is a verified fact that one property of biblical prophecy is its obscurity. We simply do not look for, and have no right to expect, in Old Testament prophecy anything like a blueprint of the future.

In 22:19 Jeremia prophecies of the hated Jehoiakim that he will have "the burial of an ass," that is, no burial at all, that his body will be cast outside the city as so much refuse. However, according to 2 Samuel 24:6 and 2 Chronicles 36:8, Jehoiakim received a normal burial with his fathers in Jerusalem. Since the king died detested by his subjects, who had already experienced the bitter and disastrous results of his policies, we can say that what Jeremia predicted might well have been carried out; quite literally. But it does not appear to have been. Similarly, the prophet said of Jehoiakim that none of his descendants would sit on the throne of David (36-30). Actually, his son Jehoiachin did so, for all of three months, before he was deported to Babylon and replaced by his uncle Zedekiah, the last king of Judah. Again we can say, and truly, that the substance and spirit of Jeremia's prophecy were fulfilled. But we must also recognize that the prophet clearly had no photographic idea of the future.

A classic indication of the generic as opposed to the specific nature of the prophetic vision can be seen in Isaia's prophecy of invasion in 10:27-34 (the introduction to the messianic passage which follows in 11:1ff.). Here the prophet graphically describes the Assyrian army proceeding from the north, city by city, through Geba, Gibeah, Anatheth, Nob, to the summit of Mount Zion. Actually, when the invasion came, Sennacherib followed the seacoast and entered Jerusalem from the west. Another classic indication is detailed prophecies against Babylon found in Isaia 13:17ff.; 14, 4ff.; Jeremia 50:15; 51:58, and so forth. Babylon was to be destroyed by the Medes, leveled like Sodom and Gommorah, to remain a dwelling place only for wild beasts; her walls were to be thrown down, her gates burnt with fire, her king brought, down to Sheol. Babylon did fall, not to the Medes, but to the Persians; and the conquest of the city was peaceful, with no bloodshed and no destruction.

These examples could be multiplied by the hundreds. What they prove is that while the prophet does foresee the future, he foresees it within the limitations imposed by his personal, historical, and cultural background. 10

## The Messianic Element

We again refer to Pannenberg's comment about the Israelites respecting God's freedom to fulfill his promises in whatever way He liked. The Messianic prophecies of the Old Testament are now being used much more acceptably by informed students of the Word than in the past. The old method was to handle the Messianic prophecies as if they were simple, predictions to be literally fulfilled by the coming Messiah. It was then easy to match the New Testament fulfillment with the prediction as if a direct one- to- one relationship existed between them. Many Jews must have wondered about the Christian method of using the Bible! But many Old Testament passages which the New Testament declares have been fulfilled in Jesus were concerned with local historical situations which applied to the prophet or to his people. Details associated with the original words of the prophet cannot be applied to Christ at all. The prophecy about the virgin (or young woman) conceiving and bearing a son is an example. A reading of Isaiah 7 will quickly demonstrate that not all details regarding this child can be applied to Christ. The young woman was probably Isaiah's wife. (Isa. 8:3). Although Matthew used Hosea 11:1 as a prophecy (Matt. 2:15), it was written by Hosea as a historical statement about the Exodus. Yet Matthew says Jesus "fulfilled" this scripture. Jesus did not fulfill a prediction but a historical type.

The New Testament authors understood that Jesus fulfilled the Old Testament by recapitulating its history as the new Israel, the new Moses, the new David, the new Adam and the new Temple. Not all features of what we might call "Messianic prophecies" are represented in the New Testament story of Jesus. Many Old Testament details do not apply to Christ and therefore disappear. Or prophecy is fulfilled apotelesmatically, so that certain features of the prophecy apply in one fulfillment, but some details do not apply in the next or greater fulfillment at all.

Says John L. McKenzie in his excellent essay on "The Transformation of Old Testament Messianism":

**It is not, and we trust never will be, necessary and proper to explain and defend our faith by anything else but the truth....**

**We have lost some messianic texts— or rather we recognize that we never had them; we have gained understanding of others. But we have gained far more. Modern biblical studies have given the messianic belief a breadth and a depth which we never perceived in earlier generations, and they have shown us that messianism influenced the composition of the New Testament far more than we realized. Jesus was the Messiah, the fulfillment of the hope of Israel, not by verifying predictions of isolated episodes in His life but by bringing the reality for which Israel hoped....**

**Jesus is the reality which gives fullness to the reality of the Old Testament; He satisfies its desires, realizes its hopes and potentialities, gives it intelligibility. He is the fullness of Israel. 11**

When Jesus fulfilled the hopes and destiny of Israel, He transformed them. He was far greater than a literal reading of the Old Testament could possibly indicate. No one reading the Old Testament prophecies could anticipate just what God would do in His great act in Christ. An element of divine surprise remained until the event occurred. And even then the fulfillment of prophecy was evident only to faith.

In the same way, the apostles saw many Old Testament prophecies fulfilled in the Christian church's mission to the Gentiles. How could anyone reading Amos 9:11, 12 (restoring David's fallen tent) have possibly seen a picture of Pentecost and the ingathering of the Gentiles, (Acts 15:16, 17)? And when those Old Testament prophecies found their fulfillment in the Christian church, some subsidiary features, couched in the poetic imagery of Palestinian life, disappeared. They found their fulfillment in *principle*, but a way no one could have anticipated.

The way that the New Testament applies the prophecies of the Old Testament to Christ and the church illustrates the difference between the Hebrew approach to prophecy and the rationalistic approach of Westerners. We have often thought that a detailed fulfillment proves the accuracy of biblical predictions or that the right interpretation is the one in which all details can be matched with the event. But the men of Bible times had another approach. They were not always concerned with details. In fact, when some Old Testament prophecies were applied to Christ or the

church, many of the details were excluded, just as the details of a type may be excluded and not be involved in the antitype.

A prophecy in the Bible may have a preliminary fulfillment and a larger fulfillment. The principal fulfillment is not necessarily the one in which all the details fit. It is evident that some details in the Messianic prophecies show us that prophecy was never intended as a detailed blueprint of the future. The Hebrews did not have our Western passion for scientific, exact and detailed fulfillment. They were far more "romantic" or poetic in expressing their hopes and aspirations. And even as the New Testament demonstrates, they moved in a typological framework which allowed far more fluidity. J. Duncan Derrett observes, "To the Jewish mind there is nothing incongruous in a story's having two tendencies or implications, for both may be true and inconsistencies are of little moment." <sup>12</sup> Thus, the passion of Christ is seen both as the fulfillment of the Easter Passover season and of the high-priestly acts on the autumnal Day of Atonement.

If the Hebrews could be so fluid in their use of prophecy that they did not press it into a prediction-fulfillment schema, can prophecy be made to fit anything? The answer is that the Judeo-Christian religion is a historical religion. The story of the Exodus or of Jesus Christ was not the result of some ingenious method of interpreting prophecy. The apostles "do not construct a fanciful Christ of the imagination out of an amalgam of Old Testament types and figures." <sup>13</sup> Rather, the concrete historical event of Jesus of Nazareth and the resurrection determined the way they read the Old Testament. Their interpretation of the Old Testament prophecies did not produce the Christ story. But in the light of the Christ event, the apostles discerned the correspondence between the history of the Old Testament and the history of Jesus Christ.

## **The Chronological Element**

Most forms of historicism and futurism being taught in the church today have their roots in the nineteenth century. They have a passion for mathematical exactness in the fulfillment of prophecy, and this is applied especially to the time prophecies of apocalyptic literature. For example, historicists say that a day in symbolic (apocalyptic) prophecy equals exactly one year. In those passages on the 1,260 days, the prophet was supposedly predicting that the pope would be taken prisoner by General Berthier in the year 1798. Great pains are taken to determine the exact starting and finishing points of these apocalyptic time periods. Futurists are equally insistent on mathematical exactness. They suppose that the 1,260 days mean 1,260 literal days to be fulfilled in some future event— as if the apocalyptic author were looking at an exact time-table of events in modern Palestine. Both historicists and futurists think that the mysterious numerology of apocalyptic literature demands the

computation of the times and seasons in God's program of last-day events.

Since the nineteenth century, however, biblical researchers have discovered more information on biblical chronology, the nature of apocalyptic literature and its use of mysterious numbers. The issue is no longer whether historicism or futurism or even preterism is correct.

Informed Bible students now realize that we cannot expect a historian of Old Testament times to write history according to the canons of historiography generally accepted today. The unsophisticated Hebrew people did not measure time with the mathematical exactness we now insist on. Their chronology was not always precise, and certainly not complete. Nineteenth-century expositors lived in the world of Ussher's chronology, which assumed that the Bible presented a complete record extending back about six thousand years to creation. But more recent research has shown that there are great gaps in biblical chronology reaching back to creation. Says Alan Richardson, "The Bible does not give us a divinely revealed chronology any more than it gives us a divinely revealed cosmology." 14

In the first chapter of Matthew, the evangelist declares that there were three groups of fourteen generations— from Abraham to David, from David to the Babylonian Exile and from the Exile to Jesus. We now know that this chronology is not to be taken literally." 15 As Tasker suggests, "The tidy mind of our evangelist, a Jewish Christian familiar with rabbinical ways of thinking, leads him to find symmetry in the use of numbers. 16 When the Hebrews used arithmetic, it was what J. H. Ropes calls a "Jewish sacred arithmetic." 17

As for the seventy-year captivity in Babylon, we may speculate when the period began (606 B.C. or 587 B.C.) or ended. But we do not really know, because we are not really told. Neither is there a way of proving that it was exactly seventy years. The period could have been somewhat prolonged or shortened. If we reckon from the time the city and sanctuary were destroyed about 587 B.C., the deliverance came in about fifty years— which meant that the year of release was a Jubilee. 18 In Jewish sacred arithmetic the seventy-year captivity was composed of "ten sevens"— and seven was a number associated with punishment (" 'I will punish you for your sins seven times over' "— Lev. 26:18). It was also a number associated with sabbatical rest (Lev. 25:2; 26:15-35).

Apparently, Israel was charged by the Lord with breaking the sabbatical law for 490 years (from David to the Babylonian Exile). This would mean that the land was seventy years in sabbatical arrears. Seventy years were also the years of a man's life (Ps. 90:10).

The preexilic Jews numbered in the pattern of forties and twelves. Thus, 1 Kings 6:1 says there were 480 years (forty times twelve) from the Exodus to the building of Solomon's temple. From there to the end of the Exile was regarded as another 480 years (forty times twelve). G. R. Driver suggests that "the method by which this sum is reached [can] be shown to be entirely artificial." It was obtained, he says, by multiplying the tenure of office of the high priests (said to be forty years) by twelve. "Clearly therefore," he says, "480 years is a round figure approximating to the supposed sum of the years of office of the high-priests." 19

The postexilic Jews, however, did not reckon in units of forty times twelve, but seventy times seven. For example, in Acts 13 Paul estimates the time from the Exodus to David's reign as forty plus 450, which equals 490 and is seventy times seven.

The evidence therefore indicates that these time periods were only approximate. 20 The Jews were more interested in demonstrating a recurring pattern in the epochs of history and using the figures to suggest a correspondence than in dating events with scientific accuracy. Driver says that "numerous examples of simplifying numbers by adapting them to the nearest multiple of one or other of these 'sacred' numbers can be found in sober historical works." 21 As we have seen, Matthew divides Jewish history into three periods, with each period artificially assigned fourteen generations. Apparently, each period could be designated as a seventy times seven. It seems that the Jews never intended anyone to employ these numbers as a scientifically accurate chronology. Tasker quotes J. H. Ropes, who says:

**Jewish sacred arithmetic had found it necessary to calculate the future by the aid of Jeremiah's prophecy of God's salvation after seventy years; and in Daniel we find this interpreted as seventy weeks of years, or 490 years. Here in Matthew the methods of the rabbis are used, and the period from the initial promise to Abraham, by which the Jewish religion was really founded, to the birth of the Messiah is figured at three times seventy weeks of years, or three times fourteen generations which is the same thing. 22**

All this means that the seventy times seven years of Daniel 9:24 were never meant to be fitted into history with mathematical precision. Just as period from the Exodus to David was reckoned as seventy times seven years, and the period from Solomon's temple to the dedication of Zerubbabel's new temple was reckoned to be another seventy times seven years, so from the new exodus from Babylon to the new David (or from Zerubbabel's temple to the anointing of the temple mentioned in Daniel 9:24) is designated as seventy times seven years. If the reader thinks there is some ambiguity in all this, he is quite right. That is the way Jewish apocalyptic writers and even Matthew the evangelist used sacred arithmetic. They were not concerned with the exact measurement of time. They were more interested in the symbolic or typological significance of a given period.

Furthermore, the ancient Hebrews designated time more by its quality or character than by its actual duration. Time was characterized by the events which filled it with significance— harvest time, wartime, etc. Instead of using our calculators when we study an apocalyptic period, we should study sacred history to what past event the sacred writer is alluding to. We should then seek to understand the significance or character of that period of time rather than its exact chronological length.

**And all down the centuries men have continued to suppose that every previous interpretation was wrong, while their own at last is right, and is to be vindicated in the fulfillment of the expectations of the book of Daniel in their own day, only to find that their own interpretation inexorably goes to join the other that events have demonstrated to be wrong. 23**

There is a compelling reason why the attempts to make the seventy times seven years fit the events of Jesus' life with mathematical precision are misguided. If such precision were really intended in Daniel 9, the vision would have to be one of the most remarkable Messianic predictions in all Scripture. Yet neither Jesus nor His apostles appealed to such an argument in support of the Messianic claims.

The evidence indicates, therefore, that the seventy times seven of Daniel 9 roughly corresponds to similar periods of time in Old Testament history. Perhaps it should be remembered that the measure of divine forgiveness is also likened to seventy times seven (Matt. 18:22).

We are not questioning the reliability of the Bible but the reliability of certain approaches to the Bible. *The reliability of the Bible is relative to its intentionality.* If the apocalyptic authors intended to give us a scientifically exact chronology and failed, we could question their reliability. But apocalyptic literature is designed to be evocative rather than mechanically or magically predictive. The book of Revelation, for example, repeatedly evokes Old Testament events and institutions. The five months of the fifth trumpet (Rev. 9:5) are not a prediction of what the Turks were doing for 150 years nor of what will happen in a literal five months during the coming tribulation. The revelator is recalling the Flood story, when the "waters flooded the earth for a hundred and fifty days" (Gen. 7:24). The reader is to see a correspondence between the judgments of God in the Flood and the judgments of God under the fifth trumpet. Apocalyptic literature is imaginative, daring and poetic. To try to read the mysterious apocalyptic numbers as if they were mathematical predictions to be fitted into an exact timetable is to miss the artistic spirit of the literature. It is as clumsy and unimaginative as a literal interpretation of a love poem. Does nineteenth and twentieth-century piety have to be so colorless that it must treat apocalyptic drama as predictive narrative to be interpreted with mathematical precision? When the revelator sees the woman fly into the wilderness with eagle's wings for forty-two months, where she is protected for three and one-half years, he is not presenting an exact timetable. The apostle John is making a skillful play on two events in the Old Testament which illustrate the condition

of the Christian church between the resurrection and the Second Advent. Those two events are Israel in the wilderness for two years plus forty years (hence the figure forty-two) and Elijah being hid from Jezebel for three and one-half years. By such ingenious imagery and apocalyptic manipulation of numbers, John beautifully shows that the situation of the church is like that of both Israel and Elijah in the desert. Let sanctified imagination grasp these two analogies from the Old Testament, and we will have a rich source of understanding on the present life of faith. Used in this way, apocalyptic does not tickle idle curiosity, but it builds character— faith, hope and patient endurance. Instead of using our calculators when we encounter these mysterious numbers, we should rather read our sacred history to determine which event the author is alluding to.

## **The Christological Element**

Prophecy is not a puzzle to be solved by matching events with biblical predictions. This would only make the Bible prophecies a playground for fanciful imaginations. When the fears and fantasies of the interpreter are imposed on the prophecies, the message is lost and only the medium is heard.

A simplistic prediction-fulfillment approach to the book of Revelation is wrong for two reasons. If Revelation were merely a prediction of events to occur in our day, the book would have had little meaning for those to whom it was addressed. They too were told to read and understand it. The same principle applies to the prophecies of Old Testament. We cannot assume that people removed two thousand years from us "were familiar with the United Nations, rocket ships, moon flights, atomic bombs, and nuclear warheads." 24

But there is an even more serious deficiency in a simplistic historicism and a crude futurism. They do not do justice to what Revelation calls the "spirit of prophecy" (Rev. 9:10). That "spirit" is the "testimony of Jesus" (Rev. 1:2, 5, 9; 2:13; 11:3, 7; 12:11, 17; 20:4). Prophecy is the handmaid of the gospel. Being inspired by the Holy Spirit, its object is to bear witness to Jesus Christ (John 15:26). The real issue in the matter of prophetic interpretation is not whether we should use a literal or spiritual hermeneutic, but whether we truly make Christology the key to understanding prophecy. The only correct way to read the Bible is to accept Jesus' own statement that the prophets wrote about Him (John 5:39). "All the prophets testify about Him" (Acts 10:43). This testimony of Jesus Christ is the spirit of prophecy. Revelation is written for the same reason as the Gospel of John— "that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in His name" (John 20:31). If prophecy is not used for this purpose, it may attract or produce paranoid people, but it will not produce or strengthen saving faith. This is why some one has said, "A study of Revelation either finds a man mad or leaves him mad."

The Old Testament prophets use the mighty acts of God such as Creation, the Flood and the Exodus to express the hope that in the fullness of time God will recapitulate these acts in one final act of salvation. The past becomes the pattern of the future. The future, of course, is Jesus Christ, and all the mighty acts of the Old Testament point to Him. He is the new Adam, the Man in God's image, the new Creation. He is the new Israel, the new Temple, the new Moses, Joshua, David. Old Testament history is stamped with the pattern of Christ's death and resurrection. The entire Old Testament finds its fulfillment in the Man who is the hope of Israel (Acts 13:32, 33; Cor. 1:20). 25

Jewish apocalyptic flourished from the second century B.C. to the time of John the Revelator. Apocalyptic was concerned with the end of this present age and the inbreaking of God's reign in the age to come. To do this, apocalyptic used imagery and symbols drawn from the Old Testament. John the revelator does this too, but he does it in the light of the transcendent reality of the crucified and risen Christ. It is this event which now determines the pattern of the future. That which is to come has already come. All the events of the end time have already been inaugurated in the Christ event, and the consummation will not differ in principle from what has already taken place.

We close this essay with these apt comments from Douglas Ezell:

The crucial question concerning the Christian nature of Revelation is its teaching concerning God. No future event, not even the return of Christ, is the interpretive center of any of the New Testament documents. Revelation is no exception. The cross-resurrection event is the pulse of the whole New Testament. The Book of Revelation, like the Epistle to the Romans, exalts the righteousness of God, and His ultimate victory revealed in the cross-resurrection event. The difference between Romans and Revelation is not Revelation's emphasis upon the future. The difference is in the language used to express the same truths we find in Romans. Revelation uses apocalyptic or picture language to symbolize the same uncovering of the righteousness and victory in Christ Jesus stated by Paul in Romans. Both books proclaim that the consummation of the time-changing event has not yet come, *but the change has begun*. The age to come (God's time) has broken into this present evil age. The redemption is not completed, but the victory is sure.

This is our center—our curb on arbitrariness. What God has done in Christ Jesus must be the normative description of the character of His action in the consummation and all time between. The prophets, old and new, proclaim God the same yesterday, today, and tomorrow. He will not act in the future in a fashion which is contrary to His ultimate revelation of Himself in Christ. Whatever He reveals of His future action will grow out of and be in line with the authentic center—Jesus Christ crucified and risen.

John is not interpreting the future. John is interpreting the *significance* of the cross and the resurrection *for the future*. John is not looking at a sneak preview of history down through the corridors of time to the end; he is declaring God's revelation of *the meaning* of the cross-resurrection *for time and history until the end*.\* God is on His throne (Rev. 4). Christ has won the victory (Rev. 5). God is at work in the midst of the apparent chaos (seals, trumpets, and bowls). The true victors are those called out in Christ from every tongue, nation, and people (Rev. 5 and 20), even though in this age it appears to be the people of the earth (those living according to the moral standards of this age)

who are victorious. Though God's work in history has been hidden except to eyes of faith, the final stanza will reveal that all history has truly been His story (Rev. 19 and 20). The victory won in history will be displayed in history, and God will ultimately be revealed as all in all.

The recognition of the New Testament's insistence upon Jesus as the ultimate and final fulfillment of the Old Testament hope affects our study of Revelation in another direction. Since Jesus is the fulfillment (and He Himself declared that to be the case), John was able to read the Old Testament in light of the fulfillment event—the cross-resurrection. So we must be careful to see how he uses the Old Testament prophecies and events. Rather than trying to impose Old Testament concepts and structures upon Revelation, we must determine how John interprets these concepts in light of the cross-resurrection event. It appears rather self-evident, but we must remember that Revelation was written after the Old Testament and its fulfillment. This will prevent us from trying to recast Revelation in the framework and structure of an Old Testament book such as Daniel or Ezekiel. We must see these Old Testament books in light of Revelation, not forge Revelation into the mold of the Old Testament patterns which, though complete for their day, lacked the full light of the fulfillment.

\* This Journal is the oldest (August 1980) and the last to be translated into Microsoft Word. Mr. Brinsmead's view may have changed since 1980 for he is very open minded and we believe he is definitely led by the Holy Spirit. Certainly our view has changed on some points, but not all since we read this journal a little over a decade ago. What has changed is that we believe there is some historicism clouded in imagery in the letter of Revelation. What we mean is, for example, the "Woes" in Rev. 9: 12/ 11: 14/ 18: 10, 16, 19 are World War I and World War II, and the third "Woe" began in 2001 as World War III when Usama Bin Laden initiated the "Spiritual Global Crisis" between the fundamentalism of Judaism, Islam and so-called Christianity. Also, in Revelation Chapter 14, John does use imagery as Mr. Brinsmead points out. It is to confuse the eyes of unbelievers, so that only the eyes of faith can see that the 7 heads is the "7 Headed Golden Candle Stick", which Moses, the representative of the "Law", lugged around for 40 years together with the 10 "Horns" or "10 Commandments". These were and still are major components in Judaism's legal system. But, this system of law was nailed to the cross! (Col. 2: 14) It has managed to exist throughout history to hinder the Holy Spirit and cause the world's mishaps. (Gal. 3: 2, 5, 10 & Rev. 13: 3) What was given to Robert D. Brinsmead and his constituents was given. Mr. Brinsmead has run his race in service to God and the world, now Greatest1command.com has taken the baton to finish that race. We are now crossing the "Finish Line". Amen. G. I. C.

## Notes and References

1. Graeme Goldsworthy, "The Old Testament and Christian Existence," *Verdict* 3, no. 1 (Mar. 1980): 7.
2. See J. B. Phillips, *The Book of Revelation: A New Translation of the Apocalypse* (New York: MacMillan Co., 1961), pp. xii-xiii.
3. H. H. Rowley, *The Re-Discovery of the Old Testament* (Greenwood, S.C.: Attic Press, 1946), p. 203.
4. Louise Seymour Houghton, *Hebrew Life and Thought: Being Interpretative Studies in the Literature of Israel* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1907), pp. 85-7.
5. D. S. Russell, *Apocalyptic: Ancient and Modern* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1978); p. 1.
6. Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Faith and Reality*, tr. John Maxwell (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1977), p. 12.
7. Alan Richardson, *The Bible in the Age of Science* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1961), pp. 176-177.
8. Rowley, *Re-Discovery of the Old Testament*, p. 206.
9. *Ibid.*, pp. 203-6.

10. Bruce Vawtar, "Messianic Prophecies in Apologetics," in C. Luke Salm., *Studies in salvation History* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ.: Prontxco-Hall, 1964), pp. 70-71.
11. John L. McKenzie, "The Transformation of Old Testament Messianism," in Salm, *Studies in Salvation History*, pp. 97-8.
12. J. Duncan M. Derrett, *Law in the New Testament* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1970), p. 410.
13. Richardson, *Bible in the Age of Science*, p. 180.
14. 1bid., p. 165.
15. In Matthew's second group of fourteen generations, for example, three generations have been omitted according to the evidence of 1 Chronicles 1-3.
16. R. V. G. Tasker, *The Gospel According to St. Matthew: An Introduction and Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1961), p. 31.
17. Quoted in *ibid.*, p. 32.
18. The Jubilee was a release from all debts and bondage every fifty years.
19. G. R. Driver, "Sacred Numbers and Round Figures," in F. F. Bruce, ed., *Promise and Fulfillment* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1963), pp. 69-70.
20. Edward J. Young (*The Prophecy of Daniel: A Commentary* [Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1977], p. 196), John E. Goldingay ("The Book of Daniel: Three Issues," *Themelios* 2, no. 2 [Jan. 1977]: 46) and Gordon J. Wenham A ("Daniel: The Basic Issues," *Themelios* 2, no. 2 [Jan. 1977]: 51) also take the position that the 490 years are to be seen as a round number. Wenham suggests that they are equal to ten Jubilees. Young says, "The principal emphasis is not upon the beginning and ending of this remarkable period but upon the mighty events which were to transpire therein" (p. 221). In his article on "Sacred Numbers and Round Figures," G. R. Driver gives many instances of the biblical use of round figures.
21. Driver, "Sacred Numbers and Round Figures," pp. 67-68.
22. Quoted in Tasker, *Gospel According to St. Matthew*, p. 32.
23. Rowley, *Re-Discovery of the Old Testament*, p. 187.
24. Douglas Ezell, *Revelations on Revelation: New Sounds from Old Symbols* (Waco, Tex.: Word Books, 1977), p. 19.
25. For a fuller outline of how the pattern of salvation history points to Jesus Christ, see Robert D. Brinsmead, *The Pattern of Redemptive History* (Fallbrook, Calif.: Verdict Publications, 1979).
26. Ezell, *Revelations on Revelation*, pp. 21-23

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