Historical Contingencies and Biblical Predictions:

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The last half of our century has witnessed an explosion of interest in what biblical prophecies say about our future. Record sales of Hal Lindsey's *Late Great Planet Earth* (3 million), and John Walvoord's *Armageddon: Oil and the Middle East Crisis* (1.4 million),[1] indicate that many English speaking evangelicals read the Bible to find out what will happen in the future and how current events fit within that chronological framework.

Recent events have only encouraged enthusiasm for this hermeneutic. Moral decay in western culture has raised fears of cataclysmic divine retribution. Political troubles in various parts of the world have been interpreted as the initial stages of history's grand finale. As a result, evangelicals have developed nothing less than a monomania in the interpretation of biblical prophecy. More than anything else, they try to discover God's plan for the future and what role events today play within that divine program.

Our study will challenge this widespread hermeneutical orientation by exploring the role of historical contingencies intervening between Old Testament predictions and their fulfillments. As we will see, events taking place after predictions often directed the course of history in ways not anticipated by prophetic announcements. Sometimes future events conformed to a prophet's words; sometimes they did not. For this reason, neither prophets nor their listeners knew precisely what eventualities to expect. If this proposal is correct, it indicates that the emphasis of many contemporary interpreters is misplaced, and that we must find other hermeneutical interests in biblical prophecy.

Historical Contingencies and Theological Considerations

Before testing this proposal by the prophetic materials themselves, it will help to set a theological framework around our discussion. Many evangelicals, especially those in the Reformed tradition, may find it difficult to imagine prophets of Yahweh predicting events that do not occur. After all, the prophets were privy to the heavenly court. They received their messages from the transcendent Creator. May we even entertain the possibility that

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[1] H. Lindsey and C. Carlson, *The Late, Great Planet Earth* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1971). J. F. Walvoord and J. E. Walvoord, *Armageddon: Oil and the Middle East* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1974). Statistics received by telephone communication from Zondervan Publishing (1 Oct 1993).

subsequent events significantly effected the fulfillments of their predictions? Does this notion not contradict the immutability of divine decrees?

By and large, critical interpreters simply dismiss these theological concerns as irrelevant. Traditional critical scholars tend to deny the possibility of prescience through divine revelation. A prophecy that gives the impression of foreknowledge actually is *vaticinium ex eventu.* God may know the future, but humans certainly cannot. In recent decades, the repudiation of divine transcendence in process theology has challenged traditional theological concerns from another direction. For example, Carroll urges that:

> Talk about God knowing the future is unnecessary ... as process theology makes so clear. The hermeneutical gymnastics required to give any coherence to the notion of God knowing and revealing the future in the form of predictions to the prophets does no religious community any credit.[2]

When divinity is thought to be in process with the universe, not even God knows the future.

Despite these widespread tendencies, interpreters of the prophets who stand in continuity with historical expressions of the Reformed tradition must strongly affirm the immutability of God's character and eternal decrees. The immutability of divine decrees is particularly important for our study, and Calvinism is remarkably uniform in this matter.

Calvin himself spoke in no uncertain terms about God's decrees:

> God so attends to the regulations of individual events, and they all so proceed from his set plan, that nothing takes place by chance. [3]

In Calvin's view, God has a fixed plan for the universe. This plan includes every event in history in such detail that nothing takes place by happenstance.

Calvinistic scholastics in the seventeenth century often echoed Calvin's language. As the *Westminster Confession of Faith* put it,

> God from all eternity did, by the most wise and holy counsel of his own will, freely and unchangeably ordain whatsoever comes to pass.[4]

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[2] R. P. Carroll, *When Prophecy Failed: Cognitive Dissonance in the Prophetic Traditions of the Old Testament* (New York: Seabury, 1979) 34-35.

[3] J. Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (1559, reprinted, ed. J.T. McNeill and tr. F.L. Battles; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1967), 1.16.4.

Reformed theologians in America two centuries later also used similar language. Charles Hodge, for instance, insisted that God is:

> Immutable in his plans and purposes. Infinite in wisdom, there can be no error in their conception; infinite in power, there can be no failure in their accomplishment.[5]

As this sampling suggests, the Reformed tradition has summarized the teaching of Scripture on this subject with one voice.[6] From eternity past, God's immutable decrees fixed every detail of history. Nothing can alter these decrees, nor any part of the history they determined.

In line with these formulations, we must approach prophetic predictions with full assurance that historical contingencies have never interrupted the immutable decrees of God. No uncertainties ever lay before him, no power can thwart the slightest part of his plan.[7] Yahweh spoke through his prophets with full knowledge and control of what was going to happen in the near and distant future. Any outlook that denies this theological conviction is less than adequate.

Up to this point, we have mentioned only one side of the theological framework that surrounds the subject of prophecy and intervening historical contingencies. To understand these matters more fully, we must also give attention to the providence of God, that is, his immanent historical interactions with creation. The Reformed tradition has emphasized the transcendence of God, including his eternal decrees. This theological accent has many

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[4] *The Westminster Confession of Faith* (1647) 3.1 as found in P. Schaff, *The Creeds of Christendom* (1877, reprinted; Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1969).

[5] C. Hodge, *Systematic Theology* (1871, reprinted, 3 volumes; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970) 1. 390.

[6] For a dated but extensive discussion of the doctrine of divine immutability within the Reformed tradition see S. Charnock, *The Existence and Attributes of God* (1797, reprinted; Minneapolis: Klock & Klock, 1977).

[7] We agree with Hodge when he says, "If He [God] has not absolutely determined on what is to occur, but waits until an undetermined condition is or is not fulfilled, then his decrees can neither be eternal nor immutable." C. Hodge, *Systematic Theology* 1. 540.

benefits, but it also has a liability. An overemphasis on divine transcendence has at times obscured the reality and complexity of divine providence.

We need only to review historical expressions of divine providence in the Reformed tradition to correct this problem. Calvin, for instance, not only spoke of God's immutable plan; he also acknowledged God's real involvement with history. To be sure, he often described biblical accounts of God contemplating, questioning, repenting, and the like as anthropomorphisms.[8] Yet, Calvin also insisted that God is actually engaged in historical processes. As he put it, the omnipotent God is "watchful, effective, active ... engaged in ceaseless activity."[9]

Beyond this, Calvin viewed divine providence as a complex reality. Providence is "the determinative principle of all things," but sometimes God "works through an intermediary, sometimes without an intermediary, sometimes contrary to every intermediary."[10] God did not simply make an eternal plan that fixed all events. He also sees that his plan is carried out by working through, without, and contrary to created means. Calvin balanced his affirmation of the immutability of God's decrees with an acknowledgement of God's complex involvement in the progression of history.

The *Westminster Confession of Faith* also displays a deep appreciation of divine providence. The fifth chapter speaks to the issue at hand.

> Although in relation to the decree of God, the first cause, all things come to pass immutably and infallibly, yet by the same providence he often orders them to fall out, according to the nature of second causes.[11]

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[8] See Calvin, *Institutes* 1.17.12-14. See also J. Calvin, *Commentaries on the First Book of Moses called Genesis*. (1554, reprinted, tr. John King; Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1979), 248-9; and J. Calvin, *Commentaries on the Four Last Books of Moses arranged in the Form of a Harmony*, (1563, reprinted, tr. C.W. Bingham; Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1979) 3. 334.

[9] Calvin, *Institutes* 1.16.3. Berkhof reminds us that the Reformed concept of divine immutability does not deny the reality of God's intricate involvement in time and space. "The divine immutability should not be understood as implying *immobility*, as if there were no movement in God. It is even customary in theology to speak of God as *actus purus*, a God who is always in action." L. Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (1939, 1941, reprinted; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1969) 59.

[10] Calvin, *Institutes* 1.17.1.

[11] *Westminster Confession* 5.2.

This passage acknowledges that all events are fixed by eternal decrees, but secondary causes play a vital role in the providential outworking of those decrees.

How do secondary causes interact? The *Confession* affirms that they work together "either necessarily (*necessario*), freely (*libere*), or contingently (*contingenter*)."[12] It is important for our purposes to point out that *contingencies* are acknowledged as historical realities. The Westminster assembly did not view the universe as a gigantic machine in which each event mechanically necessitated the next. On the contrary, in the providence of God, events take place freely and contingently as well.

In this sense, belief in God's immutability does not negate the importance of historical contingencies, especially human choice. Under the sovereign control of God, the choices people make determine the directions history will take.[13] If we make one choice, certain results will occur. If we choose another course, other events will follow. To be sure, God is "free to work without, above, and against [second causes] at his pleasure," but "in his ordinary providence, [he] maketh use of means."[14] That is to say, human choice is one of the ordinary ways in which God works out his immutable decrees. In accordance with his all-encompassing fixed plan, God often waits to see what his human subjects will do and directs the future on the basis of what *they* decide.

Divine providence provides a perspective that complements divine immutability. Old Testament prophets revealed the word of the unchanging Yahweh, but prophets spoke for God in space and time, not before the foundations of the world. By definition, therefore, they did not utter immutable *decrees*, but providential *declarations*. For this reason, we should not be surprised to find that intervening historical contingencies, especially human reactions, had significant effects on the way predictions were realized. In fact, we will see that Yahweh often spoke through his prophets, watched the reactions of people, and then determined how to carry through with his declarations.

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[12] *Westminster Confession* 5.2.

[13] As Berkouwer put it, "God's rule is executed and manifested in and through human activity. There are not two powers...each limiting the other. Yet we see men performing extraordinarily important roles in sacred history." G.C. Berkouwer, *The Providence of God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1952) 100.

[14] *Westminster Confession* 5.3.

Historical Contingencies and Predictions

Most interpreters have recognized that intervening historical contingencies play some role in the prediction-fulfillment dynamic of Old Testament prophecy. Yet, opinions vary widely on how this function should be construed. One end of the spectrum tends to restrict the significance of contingencies to a small class of predictions.[15] The other end of the spectrum gives a more central role to human choice and divine freedom.[16]

One source of confusion in the discussions of these matters has been a failure to distinguish among different kinds of prophetic predictions. By and large, analyses have focused on the content of prophecies as determinative of the role of historical contingencies. We will try to bring some clarity to the discussion by distinguishing several formal features of Old Testament predictions. We will speak of three kinds of predictions: 1) predictions qualified by conditions, 2) predictions qualified by assurances, and 3) predictions without qualifications. How did historical contingencies relate to each type of prediction?

First, a survey of Old Testament prophecies uncovers a number of passages in which prophets offered *predictions qualified by conditions*. They explicitly made fulfillments dependent on the responses of those who listened. This qualification was communicated in many ways, but we will limit ourselves to a sampling of passages with the surface grammar of conditional sentences.[17]

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[15] For example, Hengstenberg argued, "Viewing prophecies as conditional predictions nullifies them." Cited by P. Fairbairn, *The Interpretation of Prophecy* (2nd ed 1865, reprinted; London: Banner of Truth, 1964) 61. Similarly, J.B. Payne admits to some exceptions, but insists, "Whether achieved by intent...or by the most extraordinary coincidences...every inspired prophecy does come to pass" (*Encyclopedia of Biblical Prophecy* [New York: Harper and Row, 1973] 59). See also, C. von Orelli, *The Old Testament Prophecy of the Consummation of God's Kingdom* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1889) 50. L. Berkhof, *Principles of Biblical Interpretation* (1950, reprinted; Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1973) 148-154.

[16] For instance, Olhausen urged, "None of the divine predictions are bare historical proclamations of what is to take place." Cited by Fairbairn, *Prophecy* 60. Similarly, W. Klein, C. Blomberg, and R. Hubbard provide a concise representation of this position. They say, "Except for specific unconditional prophecies...announced prophecy does not bind God to bring about fulfillment. God sovereignly reserves the right to fulfill or not fulfill it depending upon his own purposes and his expectations of his people" (*Introduction to Biblical Interpretation* [Dallas: Word, 1993] 306). See also W. A. VanGemeren, *Interpreting the Prophetic Word* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990) 58, 60, 301.

[17] Lambdin reminds us that "conditional sentences in Hebrew may be virtually unmarked" (T. Lambdin, *Introduction to Biblical Hebrew* [New York: Scribner's Sons, 1971] 276). See the standard

Some conditional prophecies were bi-polar. They declared two directions listeners may have taken, one leading to curse and the other leading to blessing. For instance, in Isaiah 1:19-20 we read,

> If you are ready and obey, you will eat the best produce of the land;
> but if you resist and rebel, you will be eaten by the sword.[18]
> For the mouth of Yahweh has spoken.

Isaiah made two options explicit. Obedience would lead to eating the best of the promised land; disobedience would lead to being devoured by an enemy's sword.

In a similar fashion, Jeremiah approached Zedekiah with two choices for the house of David:

> For if you thoroughly carry out these commands, then Davidic kings who sit on his throne will come through the gates of this palace, riding in chariots and on horses, each one accompanied by his officials[19] and his army.[20] But if you do not obey these commands, declares Yahweh, I swear by myself that this palace will fall into ruin (Jer 22:4-5).

The future of Judah's nobility depended on human actions. Great victory and blessings were in store for obedient kings, but rebellious kings would bring ruin to the palace. The prophetic prediction was explicitly qualified in both ways.

These passages introduce an important consideration. When prophets spoke about things to come, they did not necessarily refer to what the future *would* be. At times, they proclaimed only what *might* be. Prophets were "attempting to create certain responses in the community"[21] by making their predictions explicitly conditional. They spoke of *potential*, not

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descriptions of conditional sentences in *Gesenius' Hebrew Grammar* (ed. E. Kautzsch, tr. A.E. Cowlley; Clarendon: Oxford, 1910) 106p, 107x, 108e, 109h, 110f, 159, and P.P. Joüon *Grammaire de l'hébreu biblique* (1923, reprinted; Rome: Institut Biblique Pontifical, 1965) 167.

[18] Emending MT *wmrytmh rb t'klw -> wmrytm mhrb t'klw* assuming haplography and maintaining Pu`al vocalization. 1QIsa[a] corrects to *bhrb* (cf Pesh. and TgIsa).

[19] Reading *w`bdyw (k^{e}tîb)*.

[20] MT reads singular *hw' w`bdw w`mw*. G levels to the plural (αὐτοῦ οἱ παῖδες αὐτοῦ καὶ ὁ λαὸς αὐτῶν]. I have rendered *hw'* "each one" to reflect the preferred singularity (*lectio difficilior*).

[21] Carroll, *When Prophecy Failed* 33.

necessary future events. Thus, their predictions *warned* of judgment and *offered* blessings in order to motivate listeners to participate in determining their own future. As we will see, this feature of Old Testament prophecy is central to understanding the prediction-fulfillment dynamic.

Conditional predictions also appear as uni-polar. In these cases, the prophets spoke explicitly of one set of choices and results, and only implied other possibilities. Sometimes they focused on a negative future. For instance, Isaiah warned Ahaz,

> If you are not faithful,
> then you will not stand at all. (Isa 7:9)

Isaiah told Ahaz that he faced doom, if he did not respond with faith in Yahweh. He did not mention any other options in the oracle.

Other times, prophets pointed to a positive future. In his famous temple sermon, Jeremiah announced,

> If you dramatically improve your ways and your actions and actually show justice to each other, if you do not oppress the alien, the fatherless or the widow, and do not shed[22] innocent blood in this place, and if you do not follow other gods to your own harm, then I will let you live in this place, the land I gave your forefathers forever and ever (Jer 7:5-7).

The prophet told the people of Judah that their continuance in the land of promise was dependent on their obedience. He did not spell out other contingencies.

Uni-polar conditional predictions point to another important feature of Old Testament prophecy. Prophets did not always speak explicitly of all possible conditions related to their predictions. The context of Isaiah's uni-polar word to Ahaz (Isa 7:9) implied that the king would be blessed if he relied on Yahweh (Isa 7:3-9). Jeremiah's words concerning the temple (Jer 7:5-7) warned of exile for disobedience (Jer 7:8-15). Yet, the explicit conditions mentioned in the oracles themselves only focused on one side of each situation. We should not be surprised, therefore, to find that in other circumstances Old Testament prophets did not state all conditions applying to their predictions. In fact, we will see that considering unexpressed conditions is vital to a proper interpretation of prophecy.

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[22] MT *'l tšpkw* is a prohibition ("and you shall not shed"). I have emended to *l' tšpkw* assuming metathesis.

We now turn to the other end of the spectrum where prophets offered *predictions qualified by assurances*. Guarantees of different sorts accompanied prophetic oracles. We will mention three categories.

First, on three occasions in the book of Jeremiah, the prophet opposed those who hoped for Jerusalem's deliverance from Babylonian dominion by revealing that Yahweh forbade intercession for the city. For instance, God declared that exile was coming for the residents of Jerusalem (Jer 7:15), but he quickly added, "Do not pray on behalf of this people nor lift up any plea or petition for them; do not plead with me, for I will not listen to you" (Jer 7:16).

In Jeremiah 11:11a, Yahweh announced an inescapable doom of judgment for Jerusalem. To confirm this prediction, the oracle continued, "And they may cry to me, but I will not listen to them" (Jer 11:11b). To make matters even more certain, God instructed Jeremiah once again, "Not even you (*w'th*) should pray for this people" (Jer 11:14).

Similarly, Yahweh announced the sentence of exile in Jeremiah 14:10 and turned to the prophet for a third time, "Do not pray for any good thing for this people" (Jer 14:11). In addition, Yahweh insisted that he would not pay attention to their fasting, nor their burnt and grain offerings; he would undoubtedly destroy them (Jer 14:12). Later in the same context, Yahweh revealed his utter determination to judge by saying he would not relent, "even if Moses and Samuel were to stand before me" (Jer 15:1).

A second type of assurance amounts to denials that Yahweh's intentions will be reversed. For the most part, these passages assert that Yahweh will not "turn back" (*šwb*) or "repent" (*nhm*).

For example, the well-known oracles of judgment in the opening chapters of Amos repeat the same formula at the beginning of each proclamation.

> For three sins of [name of country],
> even for four, I will not turn back (Amos 1:3,6,9,13; 2:1,4,6).

The words "I will not turn back" (*'šybnw*) expressed Yahweh's determination to carry through with the sentences of each oracle. "Turn back" (*šwb*) appears frequently in the Old Testament with God as subject to denote a change of divine disposition toward a course of action.[23] To the delight of his Israelite audience, Amos announced that Yahweh was not simply

[23] Deut 30:3; 2 Ch 12:12; 30:8; Job 42:10; Jer 4:28; 12:15; 16:15; 23:3; 24:6; 27:22; 29:14; 32:37; 33:11,26; Hos 2:9; 14:4; Joel 2:14; 3:7; Zeph 3:20; Zech 1:3.

threatening the foreign nations. Yet, Amos also used the same expression to make it plain that God would not reverse himself regarding their judgment either (Amos 2:4,6).

Similar assurances occur in the books of Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel. Isaiah confirms the promise of Yahweh's victory over all nations as "a word that will not be revoked (*wl' yšwb*)" (Isa 45:23). Jeremiah assured his listeners that Jerusalem's destruction was sure by adding, "Yahweh's anger will not turn back (*l' yšwb*) (Jer 23:20, see parallel in 30:24). In Jeremiah 4:28 Yahweh offers an additional assurance: "I will not relent (*wl' nhmty*) and I will not turn back from it (*wl' 'šwb mmnh*)." Along these same lines, Ezekiel reported Yahweh's word, "And I will not relent (*wl' 'nhm*[24])" (Ezk 24:14) to assure of Jerusalem's coming devastation.

A third type of confirmation appears when Yahweh takes solemn oaths. Divine oaths appear in the prophets in the third and first persons. Frequently, the typical verbal expressions *nšb`/nšb`ty* appear. Amos declared that the northern kingdom's destruction was confirmed by oath (Amos 4:2; 6:8; 8:7). Isaiah and Jeremiah announced that Yahweh had sworn to destroy Israel's enemies (Isa 14:24; Jer 49:13; 51:14). Jeremiah insisted that the majority of Jews exiled to Egypt would die there (Jer 44:26). Twice, Isaiah confirmed Israel's future restoration by divine oath (Isa 54:9; 62:8).

Divine oaths also appear in the form "As Yahweh lives ..." (h*y yhwh*) and "As I live ..." (h*y 'ny*). Ezekiel confirmed Jerusalem's destruction with this formula (Ezk 5:11; 14:16,18,20; 20:3,31,33; 33:27). The destruction of other nations was assured by divine oath (Ezk 35:6,11; Zeph 2:9). Judgments against certain individuals took this form in Jeremiah and Ezekiel (Jer 22:24; 44:26; Ezk 17:16,19; 34:8). Finally, Isaiah and Ezekiel confirmed the restoration of Jerusalem by reporting Yahweh's oath (Isa 49:18; Ezk 20:33). [25]

Predictions qualified by assurances reveal two important features of Old Testament prophecy. On the one hand, these passages make it plain that some predicted events were inevitable. With reference to these declarations, Yahweh would not listen to prayers, turn back, relent, or violate his oaths. Nevertheless, we must remember that these kinds of predictions are few in number and usually not very specific in their descriptions of the future. They assure *that* some events will take place, but they do not guarantee *how, to what extent, when*, or a host of other details. As we will see, these details are subject to historical contingencies.

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[24] Following MT. Some G manuscripts omit this clause by haplography.

[25] Jeremiah 22:5 combines divine oath with conditionality.

On the other hand, this class of prophecies also indicates that not all predictions shared this heightened certainty. Yahweh forbade prayers in response to some oracles precisely because prayer usually had the potential of effecting outcomes (Jer 26:19; Jonah 3:10; Amos 7:1-9). Similarly, Yahweh declared that he would not "turn back" or "relent" from some courses of action because he normally left those options open (Joel 2:14; Amos 7:3,6; Jon 3:9). Finally, at times Yahweh took an oath to add weight to a prediction precisely because not all predictions had this solemn status.[26]

As we have seen, a number of passages contain explicit conditions and assurances. Now we will give attention to a third category of passages: *predictions without qualifications.* These materials contain neither expressed conditions nor assurances.

From the outset, we may say without hesitation that intervening historical contingencies had some bearing on this class of predictions. The Old Testament abounds with examples of unqualified predictions of events that did not take place. For instance, Jonah announced, "Forty more days and Nineveh will be overturned" (Jonah 3:4), but God spared the city (Jonah 3:10). Shemiah told Rehoboam, "You have abandoned me; so, I now abandon you to Shishak" (2 Chr 12:5), but the attack was mollified (2 Chr 12:7-8). Huldah declared to Josiah, "I am bringing disaster on this place and its inhabitants" (2 Kgs 22:16), but the punishment for Jerusalem was later postponed (2 Kgs 22:18-20). Micah said to Hezekiah, "Zion will be plowed like a field" by Sennacherib (Mic 3:12; cf. Jer 26:18), but the invasion fell short of conquering the city (2 Kgs 19:20-35). In each of the examples, the predicted future did not take place. What caused these turns of events? Each text explicitly sights human responses as the grounds for the deviations. The people of Nineveh (Jon 3:6), the leaders of Judah (2 Chr 12:6), Josiah (2 Kgs 22:17) and Hezekiah (Jer 26:19) repented or prayed upon hearing the prophetic word.

These passages indicate that the fulfillment of at least some unqualified predictions were subject to the contingency of human response. Conditions did not have to be stated explicitly to be operative. As Calvin put it,

> Even though [the prophets] make a simple affirmation, it is to be understood from the outcome that these nonetheless contain a tacit condition.[27]

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[26] Fairbairn argued that divine oaths connected to predictions were "a difference only in mode and one adopted in accommodation to human infirmity, not of itself indicative of any inherent peculiarity in the matter of the predictions." (*Prophecy* 502). I contend, however, that qualifying a prediction by divine oath raises the prophecy to the level of covenantal certainty. See the discussion on covenantal oaths below.

[27] Calvin, *Institutes* 1.17.14. As Aune observes, implicit conditions also attached to Agabus' prophecy

These observations raise an important question. How should we relate the presence of tacit conditions to the well-known Mosaic criterion of false prophets in Deuteronomy 18:22?

> If what a prophet proclaims in the name of Yahweh does not occur[28] or come about, that is a message Yahweh has not spoken. The prophet has spoken presumptuously.

At first glance, this passage appears to present a straightforward test. Failed predictions mark false prophets.[29] As parsimonious as this interpretation may be, it does not account for the many predictions from canonical (and thus true) prophets that were not realized.

Interpreters have taken different approaches to this difficulty. Many critical scholars treat Deuteronomy 18:22 as a uniquely deuteronomistic perspective that is contradicted by other biblical traditions.[30] Evangelicals usually argue that Moses' test should be taken as the general rule to which there are a few exceptions.[31]

An alternative outlook would be to assume that Moses and his audience realized that unqualified predictions had implied conditions. If this dynamic was well-known, then he did not have to repeat it explicitly when he offered his criterion in Deuteronomy 18:22. In this

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about Paul's imprisonment in Jerusalem (Acts 21:11) (D.E. Aune, *Prophecy in Early Christianity and the Ancient Mediterranean World* [Grand Rapid: Eerdmans, 1983] 337.) The prophecy caused Paul's companions to urge him to stay away from Jerusalem (Acts 21:12). Instead of resignation to a predetermined future, the prophecy produced attempts to avoid the potential danger. Aune also suggests that participial constructions in New Testament prophecies should be rendered as conditional clauses (Aune, *Prophecy* 337).

[28] Emending MT *wl' --> l'* (*lectio brevior*) following the Samaritan Pentateuch.

[29] Hengstenberg urged that any exception to this straightforward reading of Deut 18:22 would render the criterion "of no value, since recourse might always be had to the excuse, that the case had been altered by the not fulfilling of the condition." Cited by Fairbairn, *Prophecy* 61. See also S.R. Driver, *Deuteronomy* (1895, reprinted; Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1973) 230. C.F. Keil and F. Delitzsch, *The Pentateuch* (3 vols; tr. J. Martin; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1949) 3.397. A.D.H. Mayes, *Deuteronomy* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979) 283. G. von Rad, *Deuteronomy* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1966) 125.

[30] J. Blenkinsopp, *A History of Prophecy in Israel* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1983) 46.

[31] See P. Craigie, *The Book of Deuteronomy* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976) 263. J.B. Payne, *Encyclopedia of Biblical Prophecy* 59. J. Ridderbos, *Deuteronomy* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984) 208-209.

view, Moses' test instructed Israel to expect a prediction from a true prophet to come about, *unless* significant intervening contingencies interrupted.

This understanding of the Mosaic criterion may explain why so many passages highlight the historical contingencies that interrupted many fulfillments. Old Testament writers accounted for the Mosaic test of false prophets by pointing out why the predictions of true prophets sometimes did not come true. For example, the writer of Jonah explains how the king of Nineveh ordered fasting and mourning by "every person (*h'dm*) and by every beast (*whbhmh*), herd (*hbqr*), and flock (*whs'n*)" (Jon 3:7). The Chronicler used one of his most poignant theological terms (*kn`*) when he said that Rehoboam and the leaders of Judah "humbled themselves" (2 Chr 12:6).[32] The writer of Kings described Josiah's ritual tearing of his robe (2 Kgs 22:11). The specificity of these passages suggests that so long as Israelites could point to significant intervening contingencies, they had no trouble accepting interrupted predictions as originating with Yahweh.

While it seems indisputable that historical contingencies effected unqualified predictions, evangelicals have differed over the breadth of their influence. Did tacit conditions apply only to a small class of unqualified predictions? Or did conditions attach to all of these prophecies?

An answer to this question appears in the eighteenth chapter of Jeremiah, the prophet's experience at the potter's house. This passage stood against the backdrop of false views concerning the inviolability of Jerusalem. Many Jerusalemites opposed Jeremiah because they believed divine protection for Jerusalem was entirely unconditional (e.g. Jer 7:4). Jeremiah 18:1-12 amounted to a rebuttal of this false security. It stated that *all* unqualified predictions, even those concerning Jerusalem, operated with implied conditions.

This chapter opens with the prophet visiting a potter's house and experiencing a symbolic event. A potter worked with ruined clay, and he reshaped it into another form (Jer 18:1-4). Immediately, Yahweh revealed the significance of this event to the prophet. The house of Israel is like clay in the hands of Yahweh, the Potter; he may do with her as he pleases (Jer 18:5-6). Yahweh elaborated further on the analogy in the following verses:[33]

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[32] For a helpful discussion of this term in Chronicles, see R. Dillard, *2 Chronicles* (*WBC* 15; Waco: Word, 1987) 77.

[33] A number of interpreters view these verses as a deuteronomistic addition. See for instance S. Herrmann, *Die prophetische Heilserwartung im Alten Testament* (BWANT 5; Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1965) 162-65. McDavies goes so far as to find several layers of interpretation in these verses (P. R. McDavies, "Potter, Prophet and People: Jeremiah 18 as Parable" *HAR* 11 [1987] 26). McDavies' argument is not convincing. The basic correspondences of the analogy (Potter/Yahweh - pot/Israel) are

> If at some time I say regarding any nation or kingdom that I will uproot, tear down, or destroy, and if that nation about which I spoke[34] repents of its evil, then I may relent[35] from the evil I planned to do to it. And if at some other time I say regarding any nation or kingdom that I will build it up and plant it, and if it does evil in my eyes, not listening to my voice, then I may relent from the good thing which I said I would do for it. (Jer 18:7-10)

Several elements in this passage point to its categorical nature. First, each sentence begins with an emphatically general temporal reference. The expressions "at some time" (*rg`*), "and at some other time" (*wrg`*) emphasize that Yahweh's words apply to every situation.[36] No particular circumstances limit the protases. Second, the anarthrous expression "any nation or kingdom" (*`l gwy w`l mmlkh*) also points to the categorical nature of the policy. Yahweh's responsiveness applies to *all* nations. Third, these verses describe the two major types of prophetic prediction: judgment (Jer 18:7-8) and salvation (Jer 18:9-10). In terms of form critical analysis, all prophetic oracles gravitate in one or both of these directions. Referring to

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maintained throughout the passage. For strong arguments in favor of original unity see H. Weippert, *Die Prosareden des Jeremiabuches* (BZAW 132; Berlin: de Gruyter, 1973) 48-62, 191-209.

[34] Following MT. G suffers from haplography *mr`tw 'šr dbrty `lyw wn`mty ->mr`tw wn`mty*.

[35] The syntax of apodoses is not thoroughly discussed in the standard grammars. Apodoses are frequently jussive, imperative, and simple future. Occasionally, modality is in view. I have rendered the apodoses of Jer 18:8,10 modally ("I may relent" [*wnhmty*]) to resolve a problem that has preoccupied interpreters. As Fretheim says, the passage "seems to bind God to the world and to human activity in ways that compromise [his] sovereignty" (T.E. Fretheim, "The Repentance of God: a study of Jeremiah 18:7-10" *HAR* 11 (1987) 82. In my rendering, repentance and disobedience only have the *potential* of causing Yahweh to relent. As my discussion of Jonah 3 and Joel 2 below indicates, no guarantees are given. The perfective apodosis of Lev 27:27 ("he may redeem" [*wpdh*]) is certainly modal. Lev 27:28 presents an alternative course of action. Beyond this, the immediate context of Jer 18:4 supports this view. The potter is not obligated to reshape the clay. The clay will be handled "as it seems right to do in the eyes of the potter." The sovereignty of the potter is maintained.

[36] This construction (*rg` ... wrg`*) occurs only once in the Hebrew Bible. Holladay renders them "suddenly" as modifiers of the apodoses (W. L. Holladay *A Commentary on the Book of the Prophet Jeremiah Chapters 1-25* [Hermeneia; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986] 517). It seems simpler, however, simply to translate the adverbs "at one time" or "at some time" following TgJer (*zmn...wzmn*) (cf. Isa 26:20; 54:7,8; Ezr 9:8).

these two major directions of all predictions underscores the categorical nature of the dynamic described here.[37]

The universal perspective of Jeremiah 18:1-12 strongly suggests that *all* unqualified predictions were subject to implicit conditions. Sincere repentance had the potential of effecting every unqualified prophecy of judgment. Flagrant disobedience had the potential of negating every unqualified prophecy of prosperity.

A survey of Scripture reveals that the descriptions of God's reactions in Jeremiah 18 are only representative. Yahweh reacted to human responses in many different ways. At various times, he completely reversed (Am 7:1-9), postponed (e.g. 1 Kgs 21:28-29; 2 Kgs 22:18-20), mollified (e.g. 2 Chr 12:1-12) and carried through (2 Sam 12:22-23) with predictions. Yahweh exercised great latitude because his responses were situation specific, appropriate for the particularities of each event. Nevertheless, a basic pattern was always at work. The realizations of all unqualified predictions were subject to modification as Yahweh reacted to his people's responses.

Many evangelical interpreters have resisted adopting this categorical outlook. By and large they limit conditionality to predictions that exhibit two features in their content. First, the prophecy must have an imminent fulfillment. That is to say, it must refer to "the near future"[38] or to "an event which is fairly proximate in time and space."[39] Second, the prediction must depend on "some act of obedience or repentance on the part of the prophet's contemporaries,"[40] or "on the free actions of the prophet's contemporaries."[41]

Advocates of limiting conditionality in these ways have offered little support for their views from the prophetic corpus. Instead, they tend simply to point to the contents of prophecies they already believe are inviolable such as the promise of Messiah, final judgment, or in some cases, to modern Israel's right to the land of Canaan.[42] Predictions regarding these and related theological concerns are deemed unconditional.

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[37] For a similar description of prophecies regarding individuals see Ezk 33:13-20.

[38] L. Berkhof, *Principles of Biblical Interpretation* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1950) 150.

[39] W. Kaiser, *Back Toward the Future* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1989) 65.

[40] Kaiser, *Toward the Future* 65.

[41] Berkhof, *Principles* 150.

[42] For instance, Girdlestone argued for the unconditionality of prophecies toward "the children of men

The lack of argumentation makes it difficult to respond to these views. We may make only a few comments. First, it begs the question to argue that certain prophecies are unconditional because they speak of matters that are unconditionally fixed. Enormous theological biases guide such evaluations based on a prediction's content. Second, no such limitations on conditionality appear in Jeremiah 18:1-12. As we have seen, the language of the passage is so categorical that it would seem necessary for an absolutely unconditional prophecy to state explicitly that it is an exception to the rule. Jeremiah 18 sets no limitation of a particular time frame or subject matter. In fact, the only qualification is that historical contingencies must intervene between the prediction and its fulfillment.

To sum up, we have seen that intervening historical contingencies had a bearing on all three major types of prophetic predictions. Some predictions explicitly told the original listeners that their actions would effect outcomes. A few passages assured that a prediction would be realized, but precisely how that outcome would look still remained subject to contingencies. Beyond this, unqualified predictions, the bulk of the prophetic material, always operated with tacit conditions. In all cases, significant responses preceding fulfillments had the potential of effecting to some degree how Yahweh would direct the future.

Historical Contingencies and Expectations

These observations raise a crucial question: If human responses could effect the way Yahweh directed history after a prediction, how did prophets or their listeners have any secure expectations for the future? Were they not cast into a sea of utter uncertainty?

The prophets themselves point in a helpful direction. As we will see, they did not believe Yahweh was free to take history in any direction. On the contrary, they looked to past revelation to understand the parameters to which Yahweh had bound himself. To be more specific, the prophets looked to Yahweh's covenants to guide their expectations of what the future held.

It has been well established that Old Testament prophets saw themselves operating within the structures of Yahweh's covenants.[43] They were emissaries of God, the great

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as a whole" (i.e. eschatological judgment) (Girdlestone, *Grammar* 29). Kaiser argues, "the prophecies about the land are closely identified with the promise of the Seed (i.e., the Messiah) and the promise of the gospel... God took completely on himself the obligation for their fulfillment" (Kaiser, *Toward the Future* 66).

[43] For general discussion of prophets as covenantal emissaries see: R.E. Clements, *Prophecy and Covenant* (London: SCM, 1965) esp 23-27. J. Muilenberg, "The `Office' of Prophet in Ancient Israel"

Suzerain mediating covenant sanctions between Yahweh and his people. The prophetic corpus explicitly mentions the covenant with Noah (Isa 54:9), Abraham (e.g. Isa 41:8; 51:2 Jer 33:26 Mic 7:20), Moses (e.g. Isa 63:11,12; Dan 9:11,13; Mic 6:4; Mal 4:4) and David (e.g. Isa 9:7; Jer 30:9; Hos 3:5 *et al*). No doubt, the Mosaic and Davidic covenants appear more frequently than others in the prophets' writings. The laws of Sinai formed the basis for their moral evaluations. The pervasive curses and blessings announced by the prophets corresponded to the Mosaic covenant. Even the threat of exile and the hope of restoration to the land stemmed from the Mosaic covenant.[44] Moreover, the intense prophetic concern with Jerusalem and its throne shows their dependence on the Davidic covenant.

To understand how Yahweh's covenants provided certain expectations for the prophets and their listeners, we need merely to recall that the language and rituals of covenants portray these events as divine oaths. It is well-known that the cutting rituals indicated explicitly in several passages (e.g. Gen 15:7-21; 17:9-14; Jer 34:18-19) as well as the common expression "to cut a covenant" (*krt bryt*) depict covenant making events as rites of swearing.[45] Associated terms such as *'lh* and *`dwt* suggest similar concepts.[46] As Kline put it,

> Both in the Bible and in extra-biblical documents concerned with covenant arrangements the swearing of the oath is frequently found in parallelistic explication of the idea of entering into a covenant relationship, or as a synonym for it. [47]

Divine covenants were not declarations subject to revision. They were divine oaths whose invariance reflected the immutable character of God himself.

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in *The Bible in Modern Scholarship* (ed. J.P. Hyatt; Nashville: Abingdon, 1965) 87-97. J.S. Holladay, "Assyrian Statecraft and the Prophets of Israel" *HTR* 63 (1970) 29-51. M.G. Kline, *The Structure of Biblical Authority* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972) 57-62.

[44] For a helpful discussion of Mosaic blessings and curses in relation to the prophets see: D. Stuart, *Hosea-Jonah* (WBC 31; Waco: Word, 1987) xxxii-xlii.

[45] For summaries and bibliography on these topics see *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, ed. G. J. Botterweck and H. Ringgren; tr. J. T. Willis (6 vols.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977) 2.253-278.

[46] *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, 1. 261-266.

[47] M. Kline, *By Oath Consigned* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1968) 16.

All of this is to say that whenever prophets offered predictions they did so with the firm conviction that Yahweh would keep his covenants with Israel. It was unthinkable that he would violate the structures of blessing and curses given through these solemn oaths. Yahweh would never react to historical contingencies in ways that transgressed his covenants.[48]

This conviction provided Old Testament prophets and their listeners with a large set of general expectations. Yahweh had sworn himself to accomplish certain things in history. For instance, in Noah's day Yahweh promised cosmic stability until the end the world (Gen 8:22-9:17). Isaiah acknowledged the permanence of that expectation (Isa 54:9). God promised Abraham that his descendants would possess the land of Canaan (e.g. Gen 15:18-21). This conviction remained strong in the prophetic word, even in the face of temporary exile (e.g. Amos 9:15). Yahweh revealed laws to Moses that regulated daily life and the service of the cult. The prophets affirmed these structures (e.g. Amos 2:4). God promised David that his dynasty would be permanent and victorious over all nations (Ps 89:4 [5], 25 [26]). The prophetic word held relentlessly to these promises as well (Amos 9:15-21). The list of certainties derived from Old Testament covenants is enormous.

The covenantal parameters surrounding Yahweh and his people provided a basis for many expectations, but they did not settle every question. They set limits, but much latitude existed within these boundaries. Which curses would Yahweh carry out? What blessings would he bestow? When? Prophetic predictions drew attention to these matters. As emissaries of the great Suzerain, the prophets announced how Yahweh intended to implement covenant sanctions. Special revelation gave prophets insight into how the principles of covenants applied to the present and future.

As we have seen, however, prophetic predictions based on covenant principles took several formats. How did these variations in prophetic speech bear on expectations for the future? It will help to explore this matter in terms of the three major types of predictions we have already discussed.

First, *predictions qualified by conditions* specified some courses of action for Yahweh. These prophecies gave some definition to the manner in which God planned to implement covenantal oaths. For example, Yahweh voluntarily limited his options when he said to Judah,

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[48] My emphasis on covenantal promises is similar to Klein, Blomberg, and Hubbard's insistence that "we still regard the prophecies that involve the major milestones in God's plan for history as unconditional." Klein, Blomberg, and Hubbard, *Biblical Interpretation* 306.

If you are ready and obey, you will eat the best produce of the land;
but if you resist and rebel, you will be eaten by the sword (Isa 1:19-20).[49]

These words indicated that Yahweh was no longer overlooking Judah's disobedience. A moment of decision had come. At the same time, however, much latitude for God remained. It was he who determined if conditions were met. What precisely constituted obedience and rebellion? Only Yahweh knew. Moreover, only he determined the precise nature of his responses. What kind of produce would they eat upon repentance? How much? What enemy would attack? When would judgment come? How long? The prophecy did not specify. In this sense, conditional predictions narrowed the latitude with which Yahweh might deal with his people, but they did not remove all leeway.

Second, a similar assessment holds for *predictions qualified by assurances*. Once again, the manner in which Yahweh might relate to his people was somewhat restricted. When Amos announced, "For three sins of Judah, // Even for four, I will not turn back" (Am 2:4), Yahweh committed himself to a course of action against Judah. Moreover, predictions qualified by divine oaths explicitly raised expectations for the prophecy to the level of covenantal certainties. For instance, Ezekiel's announcement that utter destruction would come to Jerusalem (e.g. Ezk 5:11) was as sure to come about as Yahweh's oath to sustain the Davidic dynasty (Ps 110:4). The language of solemn oaths had the effect of equating this class of predictions with the inviolable covenants. Nevertheless, latitude remained even here. When? How? By whom? How long? These more specific questions remained unanswered for the prophets and their audiences.

Third, we may speak of expectations related to *predictions without qualifications* in at least two ways. On the one hand, Moses' criterion for true prophets in Deuteronomy 18:22 assured that unqualified announcements from Yahweh would take place in the absence of a significant intervening historical contingency. If recipients of an oracle of judgment did not repent, they could be confident that the judgment would come. If recipients of an oracle of blessing did not turn away from Yahweh, the blessing would be realized.

On the other hand, however, we must also ask what expectations were appropriate when intervening historical contingencies took place. Could the recipients be confident of a particular outcome? With regard to oracles of judgment several passages make it clear that no specific expectations came to those who repented and sought Yahweh's favor. For instance, when Jonah announced that Nineveh would be destroyed in forty days (Jonah 3:4), the king of Nineveh called for repentance and fasting (Jonah 3:7-9). Nevertheless, he did not respond

[49] For textual comments related to this passage see footnote 18 above.

with full assurance that Yahweh would relent. Instead, he said, "Who knows (*my ywd`)*? The god may turn back *(yšwb*) and relent (*wnhm*) (Jonah 3:9).

Joel predicted an army of locusts was about to destroy Judah (2:1-11). He then called for repentance (2:12-13). But what was the expectation? As Joel put it, "Who knows (*my ywd`)*? [God] may turn back (*yšwb*) and relent (*wnhm*) (Joel 2:14). Once again, the motivation for repentance was not that a human response obligated Yahweh to relent. No one could be sure if he would turn back or not.

A similar situation also occurred after Nathan prophesied that Bathsheba's first child would die (2 Sam 12:14). David prayed and fasted for the child until the prophecy was realized as stated. Why did the king pray? David explained, "I thought, `Who knows (*my ywd`*)? Yahweh may be merciful and permit the child to live" (2 Sam 12:22).

The similar, perhaps formulaic, character of these three responses suggests that these theological convictions were normative in Israel. Hopeful ignorance about the future was not an unusual reaction. Neither prophets nor their listeners could know for certain that human response would move Yahweh to relent from a threatened judgment. As the case of David and his son illustrates, repentance and prayer did not always result in divine favor.

Second, Daniel 9 demonstrates that expectations were no higher with unqualified predictions of blessing. The Mosaic covenant stated plainly that rebellion in Israel would lead to exile and that repentance would lead to restoration (see Deut 4:25-31). This basic pattern had covenantal certainty. In Jeremiah 25:11-12 the prophet announced more specifically that the restoration of exiled Judah would take place in seventy years. Yet, Daniel wrestled with Jeremiah's prophecy some sixty-six years later.[50] He surveyed his situation and prayed for Yahweh to fulfill Jeremiah's prediction (Dan 9:4-19).

Daniel's reaction to Jeremiah's prophecy raises a question. Why did Daniel pray? Why did he not simply wait for the seventy years to pass? Several interpreters have noted the similarity between Jeremiah's prophecy and an inscription of Essarhadon.[51] It would appear

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[50] For a helpful summary of discussions regarding the identity of "Darius, son of Ahasuerus" (Dan 9:1) see J.C. Baldwin, *Daniel* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1978) 23-28. Baldwin correctly observes, "Whatever the identity of Darius, the writer had in mind the first year of the Persian empire, 539 B.C." (Baldwin, *Daniel* 164).

[51] See the helpful summary of comparative materials and bibliography in T. E. McComiskey "The Seventy `Weeks' of Daniel against the Background of Ancient Near Eastern Literature" *WTJ* 47 (1985) 35-40.

that seventy years was a standard sentence for rebellion against a god. Lipinski speaks of the designation as a "*un temps de pénitence, destinéea apaiser la colère du dieu.*"[52]

This symbolism pressed hard against Daniel as he looked at his situation. He realized that the exiles had not responded to their seventy year sentence as they should have. So, Daniel fasted in sackcloth and ashes acknowledging Israel's sin before exile (9:4-12). He also conceded that even the punishment of exile (9:11-12) had not brought about repentance (9:13-14). "Yet we have not obeyed him," Daniel confessed (9:14). The prophet cried for mercy because Israel's continuing rebellion called into question how Jeremiah's prophecy would play out.

Yahweh responded to Daniel through the angel Gabriel. Gabriel announced that Jeremiah's "seventy years" had been extended to "seventy weeks of years" (*šābu`îm šib`îm*) or "seven times seventy years" (Dan 9:24).[53] Yahweh multiplied the time of exile seven times according to Mosaic covenantal structures. In Leviticus 26 Yahweh warned that continuing sin would bring a successive increase of punishments for Israel. Each time the people refused to repent, divine curses would increase "seven times" (*šeba`*) (26:18,21,24,28), finally culminating in the exile (Lev 26:23-45). Daniel 9 extended the principle of Leviticus 26 and increased the exile itself seven times because the people of Israel in Daniel's day were in rebellion.[54]

From this example we may conclude that the manner in which Yahweh would interact with human responses to unqualified predictions of blessing remained uncertain. Significant intervening historical contingencies had taken place. So Daniel had no assurance how or whether the prediction would be realized. He rested assured of the basic covenantal structures, but the specifics of Jeremiah's unqualified prediction remained in question.

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[52] E. Lipinski, "Recherches sur le livre de Zacharie" *VT* 20 (1970) 40. Essarhadon admits that he deserved seventy years of punishment, but praises Marduk for reducing the time to eleven years. For Essarhadon's text see R. Borger, *Die Inschriften Asarhaddons* (Afo 9; Graz: Selbstverlage des Herausgebers, 1956) 15.

[53] McComiskey correctly warns that the "*šābu`îm* are not conceived of as marking precise chronological periods" (McComiskey, "The Seventy `Weeks'" 41).

[54] For a fuller discussion the "seven weeks" of years and the connection with Leviticus 26 see K. Koch, "Die mysteriösen Zahlen der judäischen Königen und die apokalyptischen Jahrwochen," *VT* 28 (1978) 443-41. See also J.J. Collins, *Daniel with an Introduction to Apocalyptic Literature* (FOTL 20; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984) 91-92. For multiples of seven as standard ancient Near Eastern expressions see McComiskey, "The Seventy `Weeks'" 38-39.

In summary, the original recipients of Old Testament predictions could rest assured that Yahweh would fulfill all of his covenant promises, but no particular prophecy was completely free from the potential influence of intervening historical contingencies. In this sense, those who heard and read the prophets faced a future whose precise contours remained hidden. They could hope, but the manner in which Yahweh would react to human responses remained open until the moment he acted.

Conclusion

Our study of intervening historical contingencies will raise a serious question for most evangelicals. Our interpretations of biblical prophecy have been dominated by a desire to know the future and how events today fit within it, but our proposal challenges this approach. If all Old Testament predictions are subject to variation, and most may be completely reversed, then what good are they? What value do they have, if they do not tell us where we stand in relation to a fixed future?

As we have seen, with rare exception, Old Testament prophets did not speak of what *had* to be, but of what *might* be. Even the few predictions that guaranteed fulfillment did not address their timing or manner of realization. Therefore, prophetic predictions were not designed to be building blocks of a futuristic scheme into which current events fit in particular ways. To approach biblical prophecies in this manner is to misuse them.

Our study suggests that we need a shift in hermeneutical orientation toward biblical prophecy. Rather than involving ourselves in ceaseless debates over this or that eschatological scheme and how current history relates to it, we should approach biblical prophecies in ways that accord more with the role of intervening historical contingencies. At least two principle hermeneutical concerns move to the foreground. These interpretative issues parallel popular approaches to biblical prophecy, but they are different as well.

In the first place, prophetic predictions should still cause us to deepen our interest in the future, but with a different emphasis. Instead of looking at biblical predictions as statements of what has to be, we must view them as announcements of what might be coming. As we have seen, with rare exception, Old Testament prophets did not speak of a fixed but potential future. Nevertheless, the first audiences of biblical predictions still turned their thoughts toward futurity. The king of Nineveh feared what Yahweh threatened to do to his city when he heard Jonah's message (Jon 3:6). Rehoboam and the officials of Judah gave attention to the possibility of defeat when Shemiah predicted Shishak's victory (2 Chr 12:6). Similarly, Daniel looked forward to the restoration of Israel because of Jeremiah's seventy year prophecy (Dan 9:2-3). These recipients of predictions did not ignore Yahweh's word

just because it was subject to tacit conditions. Ignorance of precisely how or if these predictions would play out did not cast aside interest in the future. On the contrary, hearing a threat of judgment or an offering of blessing was enough to spark their interests in what Yahweh intended to do.

This interest in the potential future is understandable when we remember that prophetic predictions conveyed Israel's greatest fears and hopes. On the one hand, Yahweh often threatened to do horrible things in the world. When the prophets announced death, destruction, and exile for the people of God, faithful Israelites could hardly turn a deaf ear. Unlike our day when secular minds scoff at the possibility of divinity intruding into history in violent anger, ancient Israelites believed such intrusions were real possibilities. For this reason, the dreadful thought of encountering the anger of Yahweh was compelling.

On the other hand, prophetic announcements of Yahweh's blessing touched on the highest ideals and greatest desires of faithful Israelites. The prophets announced the prospect of forgiveness, safety from enemies, and prosperity beyond imagination. Unlike our day when hope for the human race has all but vanished, these hopes held center stage in Israel's faith. When the prophets told of the ways Yahweh offered to bring blessings to his people, interest in the future grew.

In much the same way, contemporary readers must not allow the role of intervening contingencies to dissuade them from contemplating their future. When careful study determines that a biblical prediction has implications for our potential future, we should consider what might be in store for us. The dread of judgment and the exhilaration of blessings should overwhelm us as we encounter biblical predictions of our future. Developing an intense interest in the future is one of the chief hermeneutical interests we should have toward biblical prophecy.

In the second place, our study of intervening historical contingencies suggests that we should also deepen our concerned with the implications of biblical predictions for our lives today. Unlike popular approaches, however, we should not speculate as to how current events fit within a fixed future. To begin with, the future is certain only to God. Beyond this, our assessments of contemporary events are too inadequate to complete such a project. Instead of looking for how actions today fit within a fixed future, we should explore how actions today *effect* the future. In a word, we should be less concerned with *foreknowledge* of the future and more concerned with the *formation* of the future.

Biblical examples we have already mentioned illustrate this hermeneutical interest. The king of Nineveh was not content with having some idea of what might happen to his city. He also applied the prediction to that very day by trying to direct the course of the future away from the threat of judgment (Jon 3:6-9). Rehoboam and his officials also sought

Yahweh's favor in order to avert the threatened defeat (2 Chr 12:6). In much the same way, Daniel tried his best to insure that Jeremiah's prediction of restoration would take place (Dan 9:3). In these and other examples, the recipients of predictions knew that historical contingencies could effect the realizations of the prophetic word. So they responded with attempts to thwart judgment and secure blessing. Appropriate repentance, prayer, and a redirection of lifestyle became a chief hermeneutical concern.

In much the same way, our focus on current events in the light of biblical prophecy should entail our efforts to form the future. The fatalism of popular approaches should be replaced by piety and activism intent on avoiding judgment and securing blessing. If we believe that human responses to biblical predictions effect the ways in which the future unfolds, we should make certain that our responses direct the future toward divine blessing. Turning away from sin, offering prayers, and working for the kingdom must become our central hermeneutical concern.

Our study of biblical prophecy opens the way for exploring a number of interesting passages. Perhaps it provides a framework for understanding why Jesus told the apostles, "some standing here will not taste death before they see the kingdom of God come with power" (Mark 9:1). Did intervening contingencies delay the return of Christ? Maybe Peter was operating with a similar concept when he admitted that the apparent delay of Christ's return was due to the fact that God "is patient with you, not wanting any to perish, but to come to repentance" (2 Pet 3:9). Does this view explain why he then exhorted his readers, "You should be holy and godly, looking forward to the day of God and speeding its coming" (2 Pet 3:12)? Perhaps John had this outlook as he heard Jesus announce, "Yes, I am coming soon," (Rev 22:20). Was this the reason he responded, "Amen. Come, Lord Jesus" (Rev 22:20)?

If the proposal of this study is correct, we are not involved in an irrelevant academic debate. The way we handle biblical predictions will greatly effect how they are fulfilled. Our failure to respond properly may actually extend the sufferings of the church by delaying our ultimate victory. Even so, if we make proper use of biblical predictions, they will enhance our hopes for the future and incite us to live today in ways that will hasten the consummation of all things.