

MAKING SENSE OF PROPHECY
RECOGNIZING THE PRESENCE OF CONTINGENCY

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Difficult interpretive challenges face readers of Old Testament prophecy.¹ One of the most challenging questions is the following: Are prophetic messages coherent and reliable? Convinced that the Bible is inerrant Scripture and that God is trustworthy, evangelical interpreters are predisposed to answer this question with a quick “Of course!” But an examination of the textual evidence precludes any easy, self-assured, positive response, for prophetic messages sometimes appear to be anything but coherent and consistent. To make matters worse, many prophecies, if interpreted in a straightforward manner, were not fulfilled as stated.

As an example, consider the prophetic message of Micah. In 3:12 the prophet announces Zion will be leveled as a result of her leaders’ sins (vv. 1-11). As we know from Jeremiah 26:18-19, King Hezekiah and the people understood this as a prophecy of imminent doom, undoubtedly at the hands of the Assyrian army (cf. Isa. 36-37). Some statements in Micah 4 appear to be consistent with this judgment announcement (cf. 4:9-10a; 5:1), but others picture the city being delivered from a threatening army (4:11-13) and speak of a Babylonian, not an Assyrian, exile (4:10b). To make a confusing picture even more perplexing, the prophet goes on to talk about a king who will defeat the Assyrians, but only after God’s people have been conquered, exiled, and then restored to their land (5:2-6). What do we make of all this? Will Zion be delivered from the present crisis or not? Can the picture of deliverance in 4:11-13 be harmonized with the prophecy of defeat and exile? Furthermore, no Davidic king ever conquered the Assyrians. How then do we explain the apparent failure of the prophecy in 5:5-6? The situation in Micah is a microcosm of what one encounters throughout the prophetic literature. In virtually every prophetic book one finds apparent inconsistencies and confronts the disconcerting reality of seemingly unfulfilled prophecy.

In this essay I address the problem of prophetic unity and reliability. I propose that many of the problems in Micah 3-5, and in so many other texts like it, can be resolved once one understands the nature of prophetic speech. I argue that the function of prophetic predictive discourse is often dynamic, not performative. This means that many prophecies were contingent, not unconditional.

Language Function in Prophetic Speech

Two types of discourse are prominent in prophetic speech. The prophets utilize a combination of expository and hortatory discourse (traditionally referred to as “forthtelling”) to accuse their listeners of covenantal violations and to exhort them to change their behavior. They also employ predictive discourse (“foretelling”) to support

¹In this essay I am dealing with classical prophecy, not apocalyptic visionary literature (i.e., the Book of Daniel).

their accusations and appeals. Though the basic categories of forthtelling and foretelling have long been recognized, their relationship has not always been fully understood or appreciated.

To appreciate how these discourse types contribute to prophetic speech, one must examine their language function.² Expository-hortatory discourse has evaluative and dynamic functions. According to Macky, evaluative speech expresses the speaker's "judgment on the quality of something," while dynamic speech is "intended to change hearers personally." As Macky observes, the latter can be affective ("aimed at arousing emotions"), pedagogical ("intended to illuminate darkness"), or transforming ("intended to change hearers' attitudes, values and commitments, often by first arousing emotion and illuminating the darkness").³

Predictive discourse can be dynamic or performative in function. Macky explains that performative language "performs some non-linguistic act, such as a judge decreeing, 'The defendant is acquitted.'" ⁴ Predictive discourse is performative when it announces God's intentions unconditionally, for the prophecy sets in motion a series of events that leads to its fulfillment. Some popular views of prophecy, as well as higher-critical approaches, assume that all predictions are unconditional and therefore performative. However, an examination of the evidence suggests that prophetic predictive discourse is often (usually?) dynamic. It announces God's intentions conditionally and is intended to motivate a positive response to the hortatory discourse it typically accompanies. In this case the prophecy's predictive element is actually designed to prevent (in the case of a judgment announcement) or facilitate (in the case of a salvation announcement) its fulfillment.

Dynamic Speech in Predictive Discourse

The Principle of Contingency

God sometimes makes unconditional pronouncements about the future, but often (usually?) his statements of intention are conditional.⁵ Sometimes conditions are explicitly stated (e.g. Isa. 1:19-20), but more often they are unstated and implicit.

²For a brief discussion of the relationship between a discourse type and its function, see E. Ray Clendenen, "Textlinguistics and Prophecy in the Book of the Twelve," *JETS* 46 (2003): 387-88.

³Peter W. Macky, *The Centrality of Metaphors to Biblical Thought: A Method for Interpreting the Bible* (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen, 1990), 16.

⁴*Ibid.* Following Thiselton's argument, Walter Houston points out that performative language achieves "its effect through a complex of conventions and institutional facts," not because of some alleged magical quality. See his "What Did the Prophets Think They Were Doing? Speech Acts and Prophetic Discourse in the Old Testament," *Biblical Interpretation* 1 (1993): 170.

⁵On the distinction between unconditional decrees and conditional statements of intention, see Robert B. Chisholm, Jr., "Does God 'Change His Mind'?" *BSac* 152 (1995): 387-99. Even when God makes an unconditional decree, there are often conditional elements pertaining to timing and other details. See Bruce K. Waltke, "The Phenomenon of Conditionality within Unconditional Covenants," in *Israel's Apostasy and Restoration: Essays in Honor of Roland K. Harrison*, ed. Avraham Gileadi (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1988), 123-39.

Jeremiah 18 is a foundational text in this regard. The Lord sent Jeremiah to the potter's house for an object lesson (vv. 1-2). As the potter shaped his pot according to a specific design, the clay was not pliable, so the potter reshaped it into a different type of pot (vv. 3-4). Just as the potter improvised his design for the uncooperative clay, so the Lord could change his plans for Israel (vv. 5-6). If the Lord intends to destroy a nation, but it repents when warned of impending doom, the Lord will relent from sending judgment (vv. 7-8). Conversely if the Lord intends to bless a nation, but it rebels, the Lord will alter his plan and withhold blessing (vv. 9-10). God announces his intentions, but a nation's response can and often does impact God's decision as to what will actually take place.⁶

Richard Pratt writes: "The universal perspective of Jer 18:1-12 strongly suggests that *all* unqualified predictions were subject to implicit conditions. Sincere repentance had the potential of affecting every unqualified prophecy of judgment. Flagrant disobedience had the potential of negating every unqualified prophecy of prosperity."⁷ Pratt argues that this

⁶By making room for human response, God does not compromise his omniscience (defined in the classical sense), sovereignty, and immutability. God fully knows what will transpire because he has decreed the future. But this decree, by God's sovereign decision, accommodates the choices and actions of creatures to whom he imparts a degree of freedom. It also makes room for God to respond to these choices and actions. This relational flexibility is a corollary of his immutability, which encompasses his just and compassionate nature.

⁷Richard L. Pratt, Jr., "Historical Contingencies and Biblical Predictions," in *The Way of Wisdom: Essays in Honor of Bruce K. Waltke*, ed. J. I. Packer and Sven K. Soderlund (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000), 189. See as well John Goldingay, *Approaches to Old Testament Interpretation* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1981), 121.

Clendenen would probably agree with Pratt's conclusion, for he asserts, "prophetic books are by nature hortatory" ("Textlinguistics and Prophecy in the Book of the Twelve," 388). Salvation oracles present "incentives motivating" change, while judgment oracles present "the deterrents to refusing the change" (ibid). He adds: "Recognizing the nature of the prophetic books as coherent behavioral exhortation, that is, hortatory discourse, has important implications. In such discourses the most prominent element is naturally the behavioral change or changes being advocated. All the other elements in the discourse must relate to one or more of the commands or exhortations, and it would be a misuse of Scripture to listen to only one of the supplementary elements, such as predictive prophecy, without relating it to the central message of the book" (p. 390).

Lena-Sofia Tiemeyer arrives at a similar conclusion in her comparison of biblical prophecy with Mesopotamian predictions. She states: "Most predictions were conditional. They could be revoked by a number of means, dependent on the specific culture. In cases where a negative prediction was caused by a person's sin, it was possible to do penance. Alternatively, when a prediction was a veiled warning, one could head [sic] the warning and refrain from the planned [sic] actions. Lastly, one could use magic rituals and powerful counteractions to revoke the prophecy. Regardless of the differences between Ancient Israel and Mesopotamia, one thing remained constant: fate, *šimtu*, had in neither society the Greek meaning of an unchangeable future, but was an elastic expression of a normative prediction of a future which would be expected, based on former experiences. A negative prophecy was never regarded as a final decision, but was always open to at least an attempt to change." See "Prophecy as a Way of Cancelling Prophecy—The Strategic Uses of Foreknowledge," *ZAW* 117 (2005): 349.

Houston likewise leaves room for judgment oracles to be altered. He argues that "the proclamation of judgment in the prophets is to be understood as *declarative*: for the essence of a declarative utterance is precisely that in the appropriate circumstances the speaking of the utterance in itself is held to bring a state of affairs into being." He adds: "My suggestion, then, is that the divine oracle of judgement in itself brings the hearers (or a third party) *under judgement*. It initiates an objective state of condemnation" ("Speech

does not diminish God's sovereignty. He cites the Westminster Confession (V, 2): "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."⁸ These second causes operate "either necessarily, freely, or contingently." Pratt explains:

"Like modern evangelicals, the Westminster Assembly did not view the universe as a gigantic machine in which each event mechanically necessitates 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 or especially the importance of human choice. Under the sovereign control of God, the choices people make determine the directions history will take . . . 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 then he directs the future on the basis of what *they* decide."⁹

The interplay between a sovereign God and creatures to whom he has granted significant freedom can result in contingent statements of divine intention being altered or unrealized. Pratt states:

"Old Testament prophets revealed the word of the unchanging Yahweh, but they 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."¹⁰

Pratt acknowledges that some predictions were unconditional, but he regards this as the exception, not the rule. He explains:

"Yahweh forbade prayers in response to some oracles precisely because prayer usually had the potential to affect outcomes (Jer 26:19; Amos 7:1-6; Jonah 3:10). Similarly, Yahweh declared that he would neither 'turn back' nor 'relent' from some courses of action because he normally left those options open (Joel 2:14; Amos 7:3,

Acts and Prophetic Discourse," p. 180, emphasis his). He explains further: "In principle such a declaration is absolute. The state of condemnation it creates is a fact, not a mere expectation" (p. 186). However, he then observes: "But it is not in principle unalterable" (pp. 186-87). This is why we see, in response to such declarations, both mourning and prayers for mercy. Houston explains: "These two inextricably entwined strands of response are perlocutionary effects which follow naturally from the illocutionary force of the oracle of judgment, and attempts to deny the validity of one or the other are quite unnecessary. The question whether the intention of judgment prophecy is to condemn absolutely or to awaken repentance is transcended. Both possibilities exist within the single form of the judgement oracle and within reported responses to it, though as we have noted, only one theme may be dominant" (p. 187).

⁸Pratt, "Historical Contingencies and Biblical Predictions," 182.

⁹Ibid, 182-83 (emphasis his).

¹⁰Ibid, 183 (emphasis his).

6; Jonah 3:9). Finally, at times Yahweh took an oath to add weight to a prediction precisely because not all predictions had this solemn status.”¹¹

Pratt’s references to Joel and Jonah are quite appropriate, for both of these prophets support the basic principle expressed in Jeremiah 18. Joel urged the people to repent of their sins, reminding them that God is characteristically “gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love” (2:13a; *NIV*). Because of his merciful character he typically relents from sending punishment (2:13b). The Book of Jonah illustrates this. Jonah announced that Nineveh would be destroyed in forty days (3:4). Uncertain if the message was unconditional or not (3:9), the king and the entire city repented. After all, the inclusion of a time limit might imply a window of opportunity for repentance. Sure enough, Nineveh’s response prompted God to withhold the threatened judgment. Jonah explained this was why he had refused to go to Nineveh in the first place. He knew God is merciful and characteristically relents from sending judgment when people repent of their sin (4:2).

Two other classic texts depicting God relenting from judgment are Exodus 32:9-14 and Numbers 14:11-20, where God announces his intention to destroy disobedient Israel and to start over with Moses. Moses interceded for the people, prompting God to relent. Though some fail to take these texts at face value, it is clear that Moses convinced God not to destroy the people. Later biblical commentary on the incidents supports this (see Deut. 9:13-20, 25-29; Ps. 106:19-23). In Psalm 106:23 Moses the intercessor is compared to one “standing in the gap.” In Ezekiel 22:30 the Lord uses this same expression when he says: “I looked for a man from among them who would repair the wall and stand in the gap before me on behalf of the land, so that I would not destroy it; but I found no one” (*NET*). It seems apparent that if an intercessor like Moses had emerged, the Lord would have relented from his announced intention and would not have poured his anger out on the people (v. 31). Judgment was his consequent will; his antecedent will was that his people obey and live (Ezek. 33:11).¹²

In addition to the passages cited above, all of which refer to the Lord relenting, the principle of contingency in prophecy is evident in texts where God uses the word אִי־לָא, “maybe, perhaps,” as he commissions his prophets. In Jeremiah 26:3 (dated to 609 B. C.; cf. v. 1) the Lord commissions Jeremiah to preach in the temple courtyard and then declares: “Maybe (אִי־לָא) they will pay heed and each of them will stop living the evil way they do. If they do that, then I will forgo (*niphal* of נָחַם) destroying them as I had intended to do” (*NET*). The Lord makes a similar statement (dated to 605 B. C.; cf. Jer. 36:1) in Jeremiah 36:3 (cf. v. 7). In Ezekiel 12:3 the Lord instructs the prophet to perform an object lesson and then declares: “Perhaps (אִי־לָא) they will get the message, although they are a rebellious people” (*NET*). These statements highlight the role of human

¹¹Ibid, 187.

¹²For an insightful study of the relationship between God’s antecedent will and consequent will, especially as they relate to God’s salvific work, see Ken Keathley, “Salvation and the Sovereignty of God: *The Great Commission as the Expression of the Divine Will*,” a paper presented at the 2005 national meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society in Valley Forge, PA.

responsibility in the outworking of the divine plan and suggest that the fulfillment of certain prophecies was contingent upon human response.

Contingency is also apparent in Jeremiah 34:2-5, where the prophet juxtaposes two seemingly contradictory predictions about Zedekiah. Though no conditional sentence appears, the prophet juxtaposes the options that lie before the king, beginning with God's consequent will (judgment) followed by his antecedent will (mercy). This interpretation is verified by Jeremiah 38:17-18, where the king's options are presented in the form of conditional sentences.

Dynamic Speech in Micah's Predictive Discourse

Recognizing the dynamic nature of prophetic predictive discourse helps us see coherence in Micah's message. The announcement of judgment in 3:12, which is logically linked to the accusation of verses 1-11 (note לָכֵן, v. 12), warns of Jerusalem's impending doom. But the statement must not be read as performative (unconditional). In Jeremiah 26:17-19 we discover that Micah's warning prompted Hezekiah to repent, which in turn prompted the Lord to relent from sending the threatened judgment. On the basis of this later reflection on Micah's prophecy, we can confidently affirm that the prophecy in its original setting was dynamic in function (reflecting God's consequent will), designed to prompt repentance (God's antecedent will). Though the prophecy was retained in Micah's anthology, the judgment was averted.

Apparently Micah's prophetic message was revised in light of this development, as chapter four seems to indicate.¹³ In chapter four Micah begins by envisioning the future (cf. בְּאַחֲרֵי הַיָּמִים, v. 1) as a time when God will establish his worldwide reign in Zion (vv. 1-5). This era (cf. בְּיָמֵי הַהוּא, v. 6) will be highlighted by the mass return of God's exiled people and the restoration of Zion's former glory (vv. 6-8). Moving closer to his own time (עֵתָהּ, v. 9), Micah addresses suffering Zion (v. 9) and refers to her eventual exile and release from bondage (v. 10). Babylon, not Assyria, is specifically mentioned as the place of exile.¹⁴ Though the Assyrians did rule over Babylon periodically, it is unlikely that Micah uses Babylon (which appears only here in his prophecy) interchangeably with Assyria (which he refers to three times; 5:5-6; 7:12). His contemporary Isaiah clearly distinguished the two and, like Micah, prophesied that Judah would be delivered from the Assyrians but taken into exile by the Babylonians (Isa. 39:1-7; cf. 10:24-34). This reference to Babylon as the place of exile appears to be a revision of Micah's original prophecy (3:12). In 4:11-13 Micah refers to the Assyrian crisis and announces that Zion will be delivered from the army massed outside her walls. This announcement of salvation is also a revision of his earlier message.¹⁵

¹³For Mesopotamian examples of predictions being revised in response to repentance, see Tiemeyer, "Prophecy as a Way of Cancelling Prophecy," 341-43.

¹⁴For a defense of the authenticity of Micah's reference to Babylon, see Leslie C. Allen, *The Books of Joel, Obadiah, Jonah and Micah*, NICOT (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1976), 246.

¹⁵The appearance of עֵתָהּ, "and now," at the beginning of v. 11 suggests that Micah is speaking of an event in the near future, not of events in the "end of days" (v. 1). Micah's dramatic portrayal of the demise of Jerusalem and its Davidic king (4:9-10a; 5:1) would have been associated originally with the Assyrian threat, but in the revised form of the prophecy this vision was fulfilled when the Babylonians conquered the

If Hezekiah's repentance prompted the Lord to forego judgment and necessitated a revision of Micah's message, then why was the original announcement of judgment (3:12) retained in the anthology? One must not think that once disaster was averted prophecies of judgment were no longer relevant. Though such prophecies are contingent, they reflect God's unchanging moral standards and demands. Micah's prophecy of Jerusalem's demise, though unrealized in the historical context in which it was given (Jer. 26:17-19), was essentially fulfilled at a later time, when the Babylonians destroyed the city, an event anticipated by Micah in the revised version of his prophetic message (Mic. 4:10). The sin denounced by Micah reappeared, making Micah's ancient prophecy relevant again. In resurrecting their sin, as it were, the people resurrected God's response to it. This time no one interceded to prevent disaster and the prophecy was fulfilled in its essence. One sees from this example that a prophecy, even when it has been seemingly rendered obsolete, can reappear when the conditions that originally prompted it resurface. While prophecy may be contingent, God's standards pertaining to covenantal loyalty and justice remain firm. When Micah retained the warning in the anthology, it continued to fulfill its original dynamic function, reminding the people of the disaster they had escaped and motivating them to sustain the repentant spirit that prompted God's mercy.¹⁶

Dynamic Predictive Discourse in Isaiah 40-55

An initial glance at Isaiah 40-55 reveals a variety of moods and themes. The section begins with great optimism as the Lord promises the restoration of Zion in seemingly unconditional terms (40:1-11). Indeed God's word, in contrast to human promises, is reliable and certain to be realized (40:6-8). The Lord urges his exiled people not to fear and assures them of his presence and their coming vindication (41:8-20). But then the prophet tempers this optimism with a couple of hard hitting speeches reminding the people that they are in exile because of their past sins (42:18-25; 43:22-28), followed by a very negative appraisal of their moral condition (48:1-22). The wicked are singled out (48:22) and distinguished from the righteous (50:10-11). By the end of the section, the promised salvation is clearly contingent upon a positive response that entails the repudiation of sin (55:1-7). The tone of certainty with which the section began is qualified, though the emphasis on the reliability of the divine promise persists (55:8-13; cf. 40:6-8). How are these variations in mood and theme to be explained?

In his treatment of the theme of delayed salvation in Isaiah 40-55, Labahn argues that editors, influenced by Deuteronomistic theology, revised Deutero-Isaiah's announcement of salvation. According to Labahn, Deutero-Isaiah "formulated a new programme for

city. Likewise, the prophecies of Jerusalem's restoration and the return from exile (4:6-8; 5:3, 6-8) would have been associated originally with an anticipated exile to Assyria, but in the revised form of the message they anticipate the return from Babylonian exile (cf. 4:10b). See Robert B. Chisholm, *Handbook on the Prophets* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2002), 422.

¹⁶Caird writes concerning Micah's prophecy, "his was not truly an unfulfilled prophecy, but a cancelled one, revoked once it had done its work in eliciting repentance." See G. B. Caird, *The Language and Imagery of the Bible* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1980), 113. While I agree with Caird's point that the prophecy should not be viewed as unfulfilled, in the sense of *failed*, I prefer to say it was *provisionally* cancelled.

Israel's future, expecting a new exodus in the form of liberation of the people and return to Zion."¹⁷ When this vision did not materialize, "doubts about the reliability of the prophetic message arose."¹⁸ Statements such as 46:13; 51:5, and 55:6 were added at this point because "the people became doubtful about the announcements of salvation and had to be reassured more emphatically."¹⁹ As the promised salvation was delayed even longer, "a different ploy became necessary."²⁰ An element of contingency was introduced; "the people are now accused of deviating from the ways of Yahweh (42:24; 48:18), described as obdurate and full of iniquity (43:24, 27-28; 48:4) and portrayed as refusing to listen to the words of Yahweh."²¹ Labahn proposes "this explanation of a delayed salvation" is rooted in Deuteronomistic theology.²²

Labahn's diachronic reconstruction, however creative, is unnecessary once one recognizes the dynamic nature of the prophet's rhetoric. In fact, the variety in mood and theme is exactly what one expects when dynamic predictive discourse and expository-hortatory discourse are joined. Labahn has mistakenly assumed that the prophet's announcement of salvation was performative. On the contrary, it was dynamic, designed to encourage and ultimately motivate the people to respond positively to the culminating appeal. By stressing from the outset God's intention to save his people, the prophet emphasized that their sin was not a barrier to the future, though they must acknowledge and abandon it. The prophet does indeed draw on the theology of Deuteronomy. In Deuteronomy 30:1-10 Moses anticipates the exile. He explains that repentance will be the catalyst for restoration from exile, spiritual transformation, and renewed prosperity. Likewise Solomon foresees a time when the people will be exiled. At that time they will repent, prompting God to restore them (1 Kings 8:46-51). The prophet Isaiah, writing from the perspective of the exile, reverses this order for rhetorical purposes. He begins with dynamic predictive discourse, highlighting what the future will look like. As he develops his message, he forces his audience to reflect upon the reason for their predicament and then calls them to repentance, which will activate the promised salvation. The dynamic predictive discourse paves the way for the prophet's expository-hortatory discourse, putting the latter in proper perspective. Dealing with one's sin need not be a depressing, discouraging experience. On the contrary it is the doorway to a bright future, characterized by divine blessing. The emphasis on the integrity and reliability of the divine word in both the prologue and the final exhortation highlights this.

Some Examples of Unfulfilled Contingent Prophecies

Recognizing the principle of contingency provides us with a reasonable explanation for why certain prophecies were not fulfilled as originally stated.

¹⁷Antje Labahn, "The Delay of Salvation within Deutero-Isaiah," *JSOT* 85 (1999): 72.

¹⁸Ibid, 73.

¹⁹Ibid, 74.

²⁰Ibid, 75.

²¹Ibid.

²²Ibid, 76.

Huldah's Prophecy of Josiah's Death

The prophetess Huldah, having announced the downfall of Jerusalem, commended Josiah for his efforts and assured him that he would die in peace and not have to witness the devastation of the city (2 Kings 22:15-20). However, the next chapter tells how Josiah attempted to prevent Pharaoh from marching to the aid of the Assyrians. Josiah was killed in battle (2 Kings 23:29-30), seemingly contradicting what Huldah had promised about his dying in peace. If one views Huldah's prophecy as performative, we are faced with a problem and probably forced to conclude, with Cogan and Tadmor, "these words of Huldah remain a striking example of unfulfilled prophecy."²³ After all, dying a bloody death on a battlefield can hardly be viewed as dying "in peace."²⁴ However, if we view the prophecy as implicitly conditional to begin with and make room for human freedom in the equation, we can conclude that Josiah's decision to become embroiled in international politics compromised God's antecedent will.²⁵ Even so, the promise was fulfilled in its essence for Josiah went to the grave without having to see Jerusalem's downfall.

Ezekiel's Prophecies of the Babylonian Conquests of Tyre and Egypt

Ezekiel announced that Nebuchadnezzar would besiege and invade Tyre, killing its people with the sword and throwing its pillars to the ground (Ezek. 26:7-11). Nebuchadnezzar did indeed besiege Tyre from 585-572 B. C., but he did not devastate the city in the manner described by Ezekiel, a fact that is acknowledged in a prophecy delivered in 571 B. C. (29:17-18).²⁶ So we have a subsequent prophecy acknowledging

²³Mordechai Cogan and Hayim Tadmor, *II Kings*, AB (New York: Doubleday, 1988), 295.

²⁴In the Chronicler's version of Josiah's death, the king cries out, "I am seriously wounded" (2 Chron. 35:23). This is incongruous with dying "in peace," for dying "in peace" is the antithesis of dying by the sword, as Jer. 34:4-5 makes clear.

²⁵Some fatalists may reject the notion of God's will being compromised. However, the biblical evidence, demonstrates that the divine antecedent will can indeed be compromised and even thwarted, prompting God to implement his consequent will as a counter-response to a human decision. A classic example of this occurs in Matt. 23:37, where $\theta\epsilon\lambda\omega$ is used of both Jesus' salvific purpose for Jerusalem and, in collocation with a negative particle, for Jerusalem's refusal to accept that purpose. When the city willfully rejected God's antecedent will (that the city repent and experience his salvation and protection), he countered by implementing judgment (his consequent will) (Matt. 23:38-39).

²⁶Some suggest that the prophet here merges the immediate future (the siege by Nebuchadnezzar) with the more distant future (Alexander's destruction of the city in 332 B. C.). In defense of this proposal one could point to the reference to "many nations" coming in waves against the city (v. 3) and the switch from singular verb forms referring to Nebuchadnezzar (vv. 7-11) to plural verb forms in v. 12. However, it is more likely that the reference to "many nations" reflects Nebuchadnezzar's status as "king of kings" (v. 7) and the fact that his army consisted of troops from "the kingdoms and peoples of the lands under his dominion" (Jer. 34:1; *NET*). The subject of the plural verbs in v. 12 is most naturally understood as the collective עַם , "people, army," used in v. 7 (see also "nations" in v. 5 and "many nations" in v. 3; cf. Joel 2:2-10, which uses both singular and plural forms to describe the Lord's great army).

Cooper argues that the switch from third person to first person in vv. 13-14 marks a change in referent. He states: "The last two verses refer to something Nebuchadnezzar was not able to accomplish but which did happen later under Alexander. Note the person changed to "I" in vv. 13 and 14, speaking of what God would do by that future destruction by the hands of Alexander. What God began with Nebuchadnezzar (v. 7), he continued until the time of Alexander and the complete fulfillment of all that Ezekiel predicted." See

the non-fulfillment of an earlier prophecy! On the occasion of this subsequent prophecy, the Lord promised he would give Egypt to Nebuchadnezzar as payment for his unrequited effort at Tyre (29:19-20). Nebuchadnezzar would leave Egypt desolate and take its people into exile for forty years (29:8-16; 30:24-26). Nebuchadnezzar apparently invaded Egypt in 568-567 B. C., but not with the success promised by Ezekiel. As far as we can surmise, Amasis, who became king of Egypt in 570 B. C., enjoyed a relatively peaceful and prosperous reign of over four decades.²⁷

What are we to say about the apparent failure of Ezekiel's prophecies? One option is that Ezekiel used hyperbolic language of destruction to highlight God's opposition to Tyre and Egypt, but in this case one would expect to find at least an essential fulfillment.²⁸ Jeremiah's seemingly unfulfilled prophecy of Babylon's destruction (cf. Jer. 50-51) was essentially realized because the neo-Babylonian empire came to an end, even though the city was not destroyed. However, in the case of Tyre and Egypt, Nebuchadnezzar did not bring about the termination of either power. Even a loosely essential fulfillment is difficult to detect.

A better interpretive option is that Ezekiel's prophecies were implicitly contingent from the beginning and that circumstances developed in such a way that God decided to alter his stated intention regarding both nations. Block surveys seven proposed solutions to the problem of Ezekiel's apparently unfulfilled prophecy against Tyre, the seventh of which suggests that the principle of contingency is at work here. Block summarizes the view as follows: ". . . though preserved literary forms of oracles may contain no hint of conditionality, the outcomes announced were often contingent. Prophetic pronouncements did not possess inherent power so that the mere utterance of the word set in motion the events that they predicted, thus leading to an inevitable and mechanical fulfillment." He adds: "Although the prophets never questioned Yahweh's power to fulfill what he had predicted, they often left room for a different outcome, especially if the conditions that had provoked the prophecy in the first place should change."²⁹ The

Lamar Eugene Cooper, Sr., *Ezekiel*, NAC (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1994), 254. However, Cooper's proposal is unconvincing. The ruin of Tyre depicted in v. 14 is a direct consequence of the actions described in v. 12, which, according to Cooper's proposal, are to be attributed to Nebuchadnezzar, since v. 12 uses the third person. But Nebuchadnezzar did not destroy Tyre in the manner described in v. 12; Alexander did. Cooper's proposal, based on a shift from third to first person, posits a transition from Nebuchadnezzar to Alexander in v. 13, not v. 12. Furthermore, the discourse structure of this prophecy (vv. 1-14) suggests that the switch to the first person in vv. 13-14 forms an inclusio with the judgment announcement in vv. 3-6, where the focus is upon God's work in raising up an enemy against Tyre (note the first person forms in vv. 3-4). Note also the references to Tyre becoming a "bare rock" (vv. 4 and 14) and to fishing nets (vv. 5 and 14). Within the ring formed by the inclusio, the Lord focuses on his instrument of judgment, Nebuchadnezzar (vv. 7-12).

²⁷Edwin M. Yamauchi, *Persia and the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996), 100-01.

²⁸For examples of such "destruction language" in prophetic texts, see Isa. 13:19-22; 14:22-23; 34:11-15; Jer. 50:39-40; 51:36-37; Zeph. 2:13-15. Ancient Near Eastern literature also employs such stylized language for dramatic effect. Homer Heater, Jr. calls this imagery "destruction language." For a helpful study of the relevant biblical texts and motifs, as well as samples of destruction language from ancient Near Eastern sources, see his article, "Do the Prophets Teach that Babylonia Will Be Rebuilt in the *Eschaton*?" *JETS* 41 (1998): 31-36.

²⁹Daniel I. Block, *The Book of Ezekiel, Chapters 25-48*, NICOT (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1998), 148.

evidence suggests that Tyre, though not devastated, did submit to Babylon's authority and become a vassal state.³⁰ God's purpose was to judge Tyre for its pride. This judgment, if necessary, would leave the city in ruins. But when Tyre submitted, this "constituted a resignation to the will and plan of Yahweh," prompting him to "suspend the threats that he had pronounced upon the city."³¹ Ironically, as in the case of Micah's prophecy against Jerusalem (Mic. 3:12), this prophecy against Tyre proved to have an afterlife and was essentially fulfilled when Alexander destroyed the city in 332 B. C. As for Ezekiel's unfulfilled prophecy against Egypt, one may take a similar line of approach and propose that circumstances unknown to us prompted God to be lenient toward Egypt.³²

Haggai's Promises of Renewed Glory

In the excitement surrounding the renewal of the temple rebuilding project, the prophet Haggai made some startling statements. The Lord announced that "in just a little while" (*NET*) he would intervene in world politics and fill the rebuilt temple with glory. This renewed splendor would surpass the glory of Solomon's temple (Hag. 2:6-9). The Lord would overthrow the kingdoms of the earth and elevate Zerubbabel, governor of Yehud, to a lofty position as his chosen vice-regent (2:21-23). Of course, none of this happened in Haggai's day or later.

One could take the rebuilt temple and Zerubbabel as archetypes of ultimate realities (for example, a millennial temple and the Messiah, respectively), but one then wonders how the message was relevant to Haggai's contemporaries. In fact, one wonders if they would have been misled by Haggai's promises into expecting the dawning of a great new era that would not really arrive for centuries, perhaps even millennia later. Would this not make God seem a bit disingenuous?

Particularly problematic is the inclusion of *עוד אֶחָת מְעַט הֵיא*, literally, "still once, a little (is) it." This construction occurs nowhere else in the Hebrew Bible; it may be a conflation of two variants, one of which may have been *עוד מְעַט*, "still a little."³³ This expression occurs elsewhere in the sense of "shortly, soon, almost."³⁴ It would convey a sense of immediacy that would not have been lost on Haggai's audience.

In light of this, it may be preferable to view Haggai's prophecies as implicitly conditional. For his part, the Lord was ready to do these great things in the aftermath of the return from exile, but circumstances in the early postexilic period prompted him to alter his plan. This does not mean the prophecies are obsolete, however. They reflect his unchanging purposes for Israel and for the Davidic dynasty. When God deems the time is right, these prophecies will be essentially fulfilled. We may in retrospect legitimately call

³⁰Leslie C. Allen, *Ezekiel 20-48*, WBC (Dallas: Word Books, 1990), 109.

³¹Block, *The Book of Ezekiel, Chapters 25-48*, 149.

³²Chisholm, *Handbook on the Prophets*, 272-73.

³³Ibid, 453, note 278.

³⁴See Exod. 17:4; Ps. 37:10; Isa. 10:25; 29:17; Jer. 51:33; Hos. 1:4.

them archetypal, as long as we recognize that their archetypal status is a later development and not their original meaning.

The Case of Mesha's Sacrifice

2 Kings 3 tells how King Jehoram of Israel formed an alliance with Jehoshaphat of Judah and with the king of Edom, and marched against Mesha, king of Moab. Out of respect for Jehoshaphat, the prophet Elisha agreed to give Jehoram an oracle. He assured the alliance that the Lord would give Moab into their hand (note the second plural verbal and pronominal forms in vv. 17-19) and enable them to subdue every Moabite fortified city. He also instructed the alliance to chop down the trees, stop up the springs, and cover the fields with stones.³⁵ The prediction appears to be unconditional. In fulfillment of the divine oracle, the Israelites struck down the Moabites and conquered their cities (vv. 24-25a). They also carried out the divine command (v. 25a). Only one city, Kir Hareseth, remained unconquered (v. 25b). When the alliance besieged it, the Moabite king tried unsuccessfully to break out (v. 26). In desperation he then offered his firstborn son as a whole burnt sacrifice, undoubtedly to his god Chemosh, though there is no specific mention of this deity in the text (v. 27a). The text then informs us that there was an outburst of anger against Israel, forcing them to retreat without taking the city (v. 27b).

The source of this anger is not indicated. With the exception of two relatively late texts (Est. 1:18; Eccl. 5:17), the noun אֵפֶסֶת refers to divine anger (28 times). According to Freedman, Israel's God is the source of the anger: "The editor/author has an interest in the House of Omri, and apparently wants to show that God would not permit an Omride to have an undiluted victory."³⁶ But if this were the case, why would God assure the alliance of total victory prior to the battle? It seems more likely that the text refers to an angry outburst by the Moabite god Chemosh in response to Mesha's sacrifice,³⁷ though this interpretation admittedly raises some difficult questions.

While there is uncertainty as to the source of the anger, it is apparent that the prophecy, though partially fulfilled, was not realized in its entirety. The Lord announced that "every" fortified city (v. 19, note the twofold use of כָּל) would fall, but Kir Hareseth was an exception. As if aware of this, the narrator omits כָּל in verse 25 as he notes simply, "the cities they tore down." The absence of כָּל in this clause is striking, since it appears in the three following clauses, mirroring the style of verse 19b.

Some interpreters consider the prophecy of total victory to have failed. Cogan and Tadmor state that verses 26-27 "stand in open contradiction to Elisha's prophecy." They add, "In reality, Elisha's prophecy was fulfilled only in part; Moab remained independent and was never reconquered by Israel."³⁸ Tiemeyer compares Mesha's sacrifice to a

³⁵In v. 19 the first verb is a *weqatal* form (וַיִּכְרְטוּ) that continues the predictive discourse begun in v. 18. However, in the final three clauses the object is fronted followed by a *yiqtol* verbal form, suggesting that the Lord switches here to hortatory discourse.

³⁶This is a personal note from David Noel Freedman, included in Cogan and Tadmor, *II Kings*, 52, note 8.

³⁷Simon B. Parker, *Stories in Scripture and Inscriptions* (New York: Oxford, 1997), 125.

³⁸Cogan and Tadmor, *II Kings*, 51.

Mesopotamian *namburbi* ritual, pointing out, “the fulfillment of a prediction can be cancelled by a drastic counteraction.” She adds: “The most surprising aspect of this narrative is the acknowledgement that Elisha’s prediction failed to come true. Also, it is remarkable that the narrative ends with the Moabites’ successful counter-act from their point of view, Elisha’s foreknowledge and subsequent instructions were initially successful but only up to the point of the Moabite king’s sacrifice, a counteraction powerful enough to revoke his prophecy.”³⁹

Did prophecy really fail? There are two better interpretive options, both of which assume the prophecy was implicitly conditional: (1) If we assume the Lord was the source of the angry outburst, then the Lord decided, for whatever reason, to give Israel a nearly complete, but not total, victory. (2) If we assume Chemosh was the source of the angry outburst, Israel’s retreat was ill advised and constituted a failure to complete the Lord’s commission, resulting in the victory falling short of the divine ideal (antecedent will). In this case, the narrator probably allowed the story’s epilogue to stand as an illustration of Israel’s paganism, a theme that appears in the story’s prologue (cf. 2 Kings 3:2-3). If either of these options is correct, then we are reminded again that prophecy, even when seemingly unqualified, is not necessarily performative.

Deuteronomy 18:21-22 and Contingent Prophecy

In Deuteronomy 18:21-22 Moses gives a criterion by which the people can determine whether or not a prophet has truly spoken the word of the Lord. The test seems to be quite simple: If a prophetic word does not come to pass, then one can safely assume that it was not from the Lord. One may assume that the opposite is true (if the word does come to pass, it is from the Lord), though other texts suggest this may not necessarily be the case (see Deut. 13:1-3). At any rate, this criterion would seem to leave no room for contingency in prophecy. After all, if a contingent prophecy spoken in seemingly unconditional terms did not come to pass, the prophet, though called by the Lord and commissioned to preach the message, could be labeled an imposter. Yet the evidence for contingent prophecy seems incontrovertible (see the texts discussed earlier—Jer. 18; Jon. 3-4; Mic.3:12/Jer. 26:17-19—as well as many others, including 1 Sam. 2:30 and Isa. 38). So how does one resolve the problem? Can the criterion of Deuteronomy 18:21-22 be harmonized with texts demonstrating that genuine prophecy is often contingent?

One could argue that Deuteronomy 18:21-22 simply reflects a different view on the subject, one that makes no allowance for contingency. But evangelical biblical theologians naturally are prone to reject this explanation, given their view of the integrity of Scripture.

The briefly stated test of Deuteronomy 18:21-22 must be qualified in light of common sense and the totality of biblical evidence. The test must apply to short-range prophecies, not prophecies of the distant future. Otherwise it would have been irrelevant to those who needed to know now, not later, if a prophet could be trusted.⁴⁰ The biblical evidence

³⁹Tiemeyer, “Prophecy as a Way of Cancelling Prophecy,” 346.

⁴⁰See Eugene H. Merrill, *Deuteronomy*, NAC (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1994), 274.

supports this. In texts where the Deuteronomic test seems to be in the background, a true prophet is in conflict with false prophets. He puts his authority to the test by making a short-range prediction (1 Kings 22:28; Jer. 28). In qualifying the Deuteronomic test, one must also make room for essential, as opposed to exact, fulfillment. Analysis of prophetic fulfillment in Kings shows that a prophecy could be understood as fulfilled even if some details were not realized exactly (for example, compare 1 Kings 21:19 with 22:38).

If these qualifications to the Deuteronomic test are assumed, then it is possible that the element of contingency was also assumed by Moses (who had learned of it by personal experience; see Exod. 32:9-14) and did not need to be stated. Operating with this assumption, Pratt observes: “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 view, Moses’ test instructed Israel to expect a prediction from a true prophet to come about *unless* significant intervening contingencies interrupted.” He adds: “This understanding of the Mosaic criterion may explain why so many passages highlight the historical contingencies that interrupted many fulfillments.”⁴¹

Of course, an alternative option (which I favor) would see the Deuteronomic test as applicable only in cases of unconditional prophetic pronouncements where contingency was ruled out. For example, when prophetic conflict necessitated a test of prophetic authenticity, an unconditional (performative) pronouncement was in order and the predictions made in such a context would have been understood accordingly.

Summary

Prophetic predictive discourse was often (usually?) dynamic, not performative. As such predictions had a dynamic speech function designed to motivate a positive response to the prophet’s exhortations. The predictions expressed God’s consequent will; when his antecedent will (revealed in the prophet’s exhortations) was achieved, the consequences (revealed in the prophet’s predictions) were, in the case of announcements of salvation, realized or, in the case of judgment announcements, cancelled (at least provisionally). In other words, many prophecies were contingent, not unconditional. Recognizing the presence of contingency often allows one to make sense out of prophetic messages that appear to be inconsistent and/or unfulfilled (whether it be in part or in whole).

⁴¹Pratt, “Historical Contingencies and Biblical Predictions,” 188 (emphasis his).