WHEN PROPHECY APPEARS TO FAIL, CHECK YOUR HERMENEUTIC

robert chisholm*

I. THE PROBLEM OF UNFULFILLED PROPHECY

A close analysis of OT prophecy reveals that many prophecies were not fulfilled either in part or in whole.[1] In response to this, one may retreat to one of two extremes: (1) discount the supernatural revelatory nature of OT prophecy (a typical modern critical approach); or (2) claim that all unrealized prophecy pertains to the *eschaton* (a typical popular approach). The first of these extremes turns the prophets into wishful thinkers at best or political propagandists at worst and robs their messages of authority. The second extreme turns the prophets into crystal gazers detached from their contemporaries. By uprooting prophecy from its historical soil, it invites sensationalistic and overly contemporized interpretation in the modern context in which the prophecy is transplanted.[2] There is a better way to approach the problem that preserves prophecy's supernatural character as well as its contextual integrity. Prophecy can appear to "fail" if we approach it with a faulty hermeneutic that treats it as inherently unconditional and demands precise fulfillment of any and all details. To explain adequately the phenomenon of "failed" prophecy we must move beyond this simplistic hermeneutic and recognize that prophetic language is inherently functional, often contingent, and invariably contextualized.

II. THE FUNCTIONAL NATURE OF PROPHETIC LANGUAGE

The language of prophecy, like most language, has a deeper function, beyond being simply informative or descriptive. Sandy correctly affirms, "the

* Robert Chisholm is chair and professor of Old Testament studies at Dallas Theological Seminary, 3909 Swiss Avenue, Dallas, TX 75204.

[1] This article deals with classical prophecy, not apocalyptic visionary literature (i.e. the Book of Daniel). It began as a paper read at the 2003 ETS national meeting and went through successive revisions as I presented it as a plenary address at three different ETS regional meetings (2006–7). I wish to thank all of those who have offered feedback along the way, especially three scholars who offered formal critiques, namely Michael Kelly of Westminster Theological Seminary (ETS East regional meeting, 2006), and Michael Grisanti (ETS national meeting, 2006), and William Barrick (ETS Far West regional meeting, 2007), both of The Master's Seminary.

[2] I am not denying that some prophecies await a future fulfillment. However, unrealized prophecy should not automatically, as a hermeneutical rule of thumb, be assigned exclusively to the *eschaton*. To do so assumes that every prophecy must be fulfilled as stated. In this article, I challenge this assumption as being contrary to the biblical evidence.

function of language may prevail over form."[3] As the typical wife or husband can attest after listening to a distraught spouse pour out his or her heart after a hard day, words are often intended to be more than informative. They are frequently chosen because of the expected emotional impact they will have on a hearer and for their capacity to motivate behavior.[4] When dealing with language, one must ask: "What do the words convey about the speaker's feelings and values? What is the real point that is being made? What is the speaker's primary purpose?" It is especially necessary to ask these questions of the emotionally charged language of prophecy.

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 their accusations and appeals. Though the basic categories of forth telling 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.[5] 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").[6]

Predictive discourse can be performative or dynamic in function. Macky explains that performative language "performs some non-linguistic act, such as a judge decreeing, 'The defendant is acquitted.'"[7] 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.[8] Some

---

[3] D. Brent Sandy, *Plowshares and Pruning Hooks: Rethinking the Language of Biblical Prophecy and Apocalyptic* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2002) 80.

[4] Ibid. 80–82.

[5] For 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.

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

[7] 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," *BibInt* 1 (1993) 170.

[8] The reader should note that we are defining "performative" in a more restricted sense than it is sometimes used. We could call all language "performative" in the sense that it performs a function, but we are not defining "performative" here as simply functional, but rather in accordance with the description given in the body of the text. For the view that prophetic language is "essentially performative" (i.e. functional), see Robert P. Carroll, *When Prophecy Failed: Cognitive Dissonance in the Prophetic Traditions of the Old Testament* (New York: Seabury, 1979) 69–75, esp. 71–72.

popular views of prophecy, as well as some higher-critical approaches, assume that all or most predictions (at least those not marked by "if" or the like) 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 expository-hortatory discourse it typically accompanies. In this case, the prophecy's predictive element is designed to prevent (in the case of a judgment announcement) or facilitate (in the case of a salvation announcement) its fulfillment.

Clendenen argues that the hortatory dimension is foundational. He asserts, "prophetic books are by nature hortatory." Salvation oracles present "incentives motivating" change, while judgment oracles present "the deterrents to refusing the change."[9] 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.[10]

III. THE CONTINGENT NATURE OF PROPHETIC LANGUAGE

1. *Recognizing the principle of contingency.* As noted above, God sometimes makes unconditional pronouncements about the future, but often his statements of intention are conditional. Sometimes conditions are explicitly stated (e.g. Isa 1:19–20), but more often they are unstated and implicit.[11]

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

---

[9] Clendenen, "Textlinguistics and Prophecy in the Book of the Twelve" 388.

[10] Ibid. 390.

[11] On 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.

as to what will actually take place.[12] 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."[13]

Pratt argues that the presence of contingency 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."[14] 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.[15]

The interplay between a sovereign God and creatures to whom he has granted a degree of 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.[16]

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'

[12] By 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.

[13] Richard 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.

[14] Pratt, "Historical Contingencies and Biblical Predictions" 182.

[15] Ibid. 182–83 (emphasis his).

[16] Ibid. 183 (emphasis his).

from some courses of action because he normally left those options open (Joel 2:14; Amos 7:3, 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.[17]

---

[17] Ibid. 187. For further discussion on conditionality in prophecy, see J. J. M. Roberts, "A Christian Perspective on Prophetic Prediction," *Int* 33 (1979) 243; John Goldingay, *Approaches to Old Testament Interpretation* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1981) 121; David Noel Freedman and Rebecca Frey, "False Prophecy is True," in *Inspired Speech: Prophecy in the Ancient Near East, Essays in Honor of Herbert B. Huffmon* (JSOTSup, 378; ed. J. Kaltner and L. Stulman; New York: T & T Clark International, 2004) 82–87; and Samuel A. Meier, *Themes and Transformations in Old Testament Prophecy* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2009) 31–34.

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 planed [*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 her "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 Acts and Prophetic Discourse" 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).

Carroll recognizes that "the language of prophecy was necessarily conditional" and "can hardly have been straightforwardly predictive in nature" (*When Prophecy Failed* 67). He explains: "Contingent language is not directly predictive but is threatening or warning. It is not designed to forecast the future but to create responses" (ibid.). He acknowledges that "treating prophecy as conditional would ease the problem of unfulfilled predictions by modifying the notion of prediction to one of threat or warning intent on changing attitudes and behaviour" (p. 69). But then he qualifies this statement: "However the contingent aspect of prophecy has to be balanced with the absolute element of Yahweh's sovereignty over everything. Beyond conditionality there was the theology of transcendence in which the decrees of Yahweh functioned as absolutes and man's activity was dismissed as being of no consequence (cf. Isa. 2.22; 40:6–8, 12–17)" (ibid.). Carroll creates too sharp a dichotomy between human responsibility and divine sovereignty, and between the conditional and absolute dimensions of prophecy. He also tends to see competing theologies at work in the text, when, in reality, these themes work in harmony along the lines articulated by Houston (see above).

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 Exod 32:9–14 and Num 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. Later biblical commentary on the incidents supports the idea that Moses convinced God not to destroy the people (see Deut 9:13–20, 25–29; Ps 106:19–23). In Ps 106:23, Moses the intercessor is compared to one "standing in the gap." In Ezek 22:30, the Lord uses this same expression when he says: "I looked for a man among them who would build up the wall and stand before me in the gap on behalf of the land, so I would not have to destroy it; but I found none" (NIV). 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).

Perhaps the clearest example of God's relenting from a conditional announcement of judgment is found in Mic 3:12. The prophet announces Zion will be leveled as a result of her leaders' sins (vv. 1–11). As we know from Jer 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). But the statement must not be read as unconditional. In Jer 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) and designed to prompt repentance (God's antecedent will). Though the prophecy was retained in Micah's anthology, the judgment was averted.[18]

---

[18] Micah may have revised his message in light of this development, as chapter four seems to indicate. In chapter four Micah begins by envisioning the future as a time when God will establish his worldwide reign in Zion (vv. 1–5). This era (cf. "in that day," 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 (cf. "now"), Micah addresses suffering Zion (v. 9) and refers to her eventual

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.[19]

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 אוּלַי, "maybe, perhaps," as he commissions his prophets.

---

exile and release from bondage (v. 10). Babylon, not Assyria, is specifically mentioned as the place of exile. 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). For 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: Eerdmans, 1976) 246. 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. The appearance of "and now" at the beginning of verse 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 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. For Mesopotamian examples of predictions being revised in response to repentance, see Tiemeyer, "Prophecy as a Way of Cancelling Prophecy" 341–43.

[19] Caird 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 the author agrees with Caird's point that the prophecy should not be viewed as unfulfilled, in the sense of *failed*, it is preferable to say it was *provisionally* cancelled.

In Jer 26:3 (dated to 609 BC; cf. v. 1), the Lord commissions Jeremiah to preach in the temple courtyard and then declares: "Perhaps (אוּלַי) they will listen and each will turn from his evil way. Then I will relent (*niphal* of נָחַם) and not bring on them the disaster I was planning because of the evil they have done" (NIV). The Lord makes a similar statement (dated to 605 BC; cf. Jer 36:1) in Jer 36:3 (cf. v. 7). In Ezek 12:3, the Lord instructs the prophet to perform an object lesson and then declares: "Perhaps (אוּלַי) they will understand, though they are a rebellious house" (NIV). These statements highlight the role of human 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 Jer 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 Jer 38:17–18, where the king's options are presented in the form of conditional sentences.

2. *Applying the principle of contingency to some problematic test cases.* Having established the fact that prophecies can be contingent, we will now examine three especially problematic passages, each of which appears to contain unfulfilled prophecy. In each case, we suggest that alleged "failed" prophecy can be explained adequately, if one assumes that the principle of contingency is at work.

a. *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 revised Deutero-Isaiah's announcement of salvation. According to Labahn, Deutero-Isaiah "formulated a new programme for Israel's future, expecting a new exodus in the form of liberation of the people and return to Zion." When this vision did not materialize, "doubts about the reliability of the prophetic message arose." 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." As the promised salvation was delayed even longer, "a different ploy became necessary." 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." Labahn proposes "this explanation of a delayed salvation" is rooted in Deuteronomistic theology.[20]

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 unconditional. 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 Deut 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 Kgs 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.

b. *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 Kgs 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 Kgs 23:29–30), seemingly contradicting what Huldah had promised about his dying in peace. If one views Huldah's prophecy as unconditional, we are faced with a problem and probably forced to conclude, with Cogan and Tadmor, "these words of Huldah remain a

---

[20] Antje Labahn, "The Delay of Salvation within Deutero-Isaiah," *JSOT* 85 (1999) 72–76. Carroll sees Isaiah 56–66 as attempting to "account for the failure" of Deutero-Isaiah's "vision." He calls these attempts "dissonance reduction moves" (*When Prophecy Failed* 150–56, esp. 152).

striking example of unfulfilled prophecy."[21] After all, dying a bloody death on a battlefield can hardly be viewed as dying "in peace."[22] 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. Even so, the promise was fulfilled in its essence for Josiah went to the grave without having to see Jerusalem's downfall.

c. *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 BC, but he did not devastate the city in the manner described by Ezekiel, a fact that is acknowledged in a prophecy delivered in 571 BC (29:17–18).[23] So we have a subsequent prophecy acknowledging the non-fulfillment of an earlier

[21] Mordechai Cogan and Hayim Tadmor, *II Kings* (AB; New York: Doubleday, 1988) 295.

[22] In the Chronicler's version of Josiah's death, the king cries out, "I am seriously wounded" (2 Chr 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.

[23] Kris J. Udd, "Prediction and Foreknowledge in Ezekiel's Prophecy against Tyre," *TynBul* 56 (2005) 32; Roberts, "A Christian Perspective on Prophetic Prediction" 242–43. Some 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 BC). 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 verse 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 in the empire he ruled" (Jer 34:1 NIV). The subject of the plural verbs in verse 12 is most naturally understood as the collective עַם, "people, army," used in verse 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 verses 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 Lamar Eugene Cooper, Sr., *Ezekiel* (NAC; Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1994) 254. However, Cooper's proposal is unconvincing. The ruin of Tyre depicted in verse 14 is a direct consequence of the actions described in verse 12, which, according to Cooper's proposal, are to be attributed to Nebuchadnezzar, since verse 12 uses the third person. But Nebuchadnezzar did not destroy Tyre in the manner described in verse 12; Alexander did. Cooper's proposal, based on a shift from third to first person, posits a transition from Nebuchadnezzar to Alexander in verse 13, not verse 12. Furthermore, the discourse structure of this prophecy (vv. 1–14) suggests that the switch to the first person in verses 13–14 forms an inclusio with the judgment announcement in verses 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). For additional support for the view that the section pertains to Nebuchadnezzar's siege alone, see Thomas Renz, "Proclaiming the Future: History and Theology in Prophecies against Tyre," *TynBul* 51 (2000) 48–49.

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 BC, but not with the success promised by Ezekiel. As far as we can surmise, Amasis, who became king of Egypt in 570 BC, enjoyed a relatively peaceful and prosperous reign of over four decades.[24]

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.[25] Jeremiah's seemingly unfulfilled prophecy of Babylon's destruction (cf. Jeremiah 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."[26] The evidence suggests that Tyre, though not devastated, did submit to Babylon's authority and become a vassal state.[27] 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

[24] Edwin M. Yamauchi, *Persia and the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996) 100–101; Udd, "Prediction and Foreknowledge" 32.

[25] For 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. For a helpful study of the relevant biblical texts and motifs, as well as samples of destruction language from ancient Near Eastern sources, see Homer Heater Jr., "Do the Prophets Teach that Babylonia Will Be Rebuilt in the *Eschaton*?" *JETS* 41 (1998) 31–36.

[26] Daniel I. Block, *The Book of Ezekiel, Chapters 25–48* (NICOT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998) 148.

[27] Leslie C. Allen, *Ezekiel 20–48* (WBC; Dallas: Word, 1990) 109; Renz, "Proclaiming the Future: History and Theology in Prophecies against Tyre" 26.

to "suspend the threats that he had pronounced upon the city."[28] In many instances, repentance is what prompts God to withhold judgment, either in whole or in part. But in the case of Tyre, there is no evidence that repentance took place.[29] Yet, as Block explains, there was, albeit unwittingly, submission to the Lord's plan and sufficient humbling of proud Tyre. This example does show that prophecy can be essentially, though not exactly, fulfilled. In other words, God's essential purpose was realized without the prophetic word being realized in all of its literal detail. This seems to support, at least in this instance, Renz's contention that prophecy is essentially "proclamation of God's purpose" rather than "historiography before the event."[30] Udd argues that this case shows that the Lord is not bound, in some mechanical or inflexible way, to bring a prophecy to exact fulfillment. Put simply, "God can do as he wishes. The role of the true prophet is simply to function as God's mouthpiece. If God decides that it is enough to destroy the economic superiority of a city rather than completely destroying it, even though his initial intention was the latter, so be it" (39).[31] He adds: "Ezekiel's God is one who plans and brings things to pass, but is sometimes willing to flex with regard to his intentions."[32] 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.

IV. THE CONTEXTUALIZED NATURE OF PROPHETIC LANGUAGE

Recognizing the presence of contextualization is also important when seeking to understand why some prophecies appear to "fail." In describing future developments, the prophets spoke within the framework of their own cultural and historical context. For example, in depicting a time when God's covenant community would be reconciled to their God, Ezekiel pictured a renewed priesthood offering sacrifices in a new temple, surrounded by the reunified northern and southern tribes governed by a new David. Speaking from his framework in the sixth century BC, Ezekiel pictured the reconciliation of God and his people in terms that would have been meaningful and inspiring to them. This is typical of the prophets; their language is invariably contextualized.

Contextualization may be defined as "speaking or acting in a way that reflects the cultural context of the addressee or observer and facilitates understanding and relationship." One of the ways in which the prophets contextualized their messages was to describe the future in terms that would

---

[28] Block, *Book of Ezekiel, Chapters 25–48* 149.

[29] Udd objects to the prophecy being understood as conditional, if this means assuming that Tyre repented. He rightly points out that the text gives no indication of repentance, in contrast to Jonah 3. See "Prediction and Foreknowledge" 38.

[30] Renz, "Proclaiming the Future: History and Theology in Prophecies against Tyre" 17.

[31] Udd, "Prediction and Foreknowledge" 39.

[32] Ibid. 41.

resonate with their audience. This usually meant that the prophets described the future as being realized in their own contemporary geopolitical context. In some cases the prophets actually anticipated the fulfillment of a prophecy to come in their time, but the contingent nature of the prophecy resulted in its failure to materialize. In many of these cases, one need not look for a fulfillment at all. However, in other cases, even though the prophecy was not fulfilled in the prophet's geopolitical context (that is, in the immediate future), one expects that it will materialize at some point because it coincides with God's revealed purposes for human history and his covenantal community. In such cases, when fulfillment transcends the prophet's time and context, the language takes on archetypal status and one should expect essential or generic, not exact or literal, fulfillment of the prophecy.

We can illustrate these principles by examining Micah's prophecy of the Davidic king's victory over Assyria and comparing it to other prophetic predictions concerning Assyria. Micah spoke of a time, beyond the return from exile, when a new David would make reunited Israel and Judah secure (5:2–4). When the Assyrians attempted to invade the land, this king would drive them back and subdue Assyria (5:5–6). One would have expected Micah, as he revised his message after the deliverance of Jerusalem in 701 BC, to depict a Davidic king conquering Babylon, not Assyria (cf. 4:10), but he did not. Furthermore, this prophecy was never fulfilled. What are we to make of this? Did prophecy fail? One might simply dismiss this unfulfilled prophecy as contingent and argue that it need not be fulfilled in the future. However, if the Davidic promise of dominion is unconditional, then we expect the Davidic king to establish his kingdom at some point in the future.

In describing this event, Micah chose to retain the image of Assyria as the archenemy of Israel, even though he knew that Judah would go into exile to Babylon, not Assyria. Why would he do this? At least two points are pertinent. First, Micah envisions the people of Israel being reunited with the king's brothers (5:3). This refers to the exiles of the northern kingdom being reunited with their brothers, the people of Judah. Since it was Assyria, not Babylon, that took the northern kingdom into exile, it would make sense that Assyria would occupy a prominent place in Micah's vision of the reversal of exile. Second, by retaining the image of Assyria, Micah's message resonates with his Judahite audience, for it was Assyrian, not Babylonian, power that they had seen firsthand and it was the Assyrian, not Babylonian, king to whom Judah had paid tribute for several years. Even though Assyria would be gone, or at least overshadowed by Babylon, by the time the ideal king arrived on the scene, for Micah's audience it remained a powerful image and symbol of the hostile nations who sought to enslave Israel and Judah. For Micah, in other words, Assyria became an archetype of the hostile nations of the world who will be unable to enslave and oppress God's people when the ideal king arrives on the scene. For this king to be able to conquer such a powerful, Assyrian-like foe, he must be mighty indeed. In this regard Andersen and Freedman state: "If Mic 5:1–5 is an eighth-century prophecy that the outcome of menacing imperialism would be the fresh creation of David's empire, then it was never fulfilled. Israel never conquered Assyria. Such a prophecy

could retain its vitality in later interpretation only by postponing it to the End-time. . . . In this later setting Assyria has now become an archetypal symbol."[33]

Other prophets also employed the image of Assyria as an archetype. While the seventh-century BC prophets Nahum and Zephaniah (2:13–15) announced the final demise of Assyria in straightforward language that was fulfilled in 612–609 BC, Micah's contemporary Isaiah envisioned Assyria's future in a more positive light. He depicted a time when Assyria and Egypt, the superpowers of his day, would be at peace and would, along with Israel, worship the Lord (Isa 19:23–25). This prophecy was not fulfilled in Isaiah's time. Though the prophecy did not materialize in precisely the way Isaiah predicted, it is not obsolete, for it reflects the unchanging purposes of God to bless his covenant people and establish his kingdom of peace. Both Egypt and Assyria are archetypes of the powerful nations of the earth who will someday recognize the Lord's sovereignty (cf. Isa 2:2–4).[34] At that time, Isaiah's vision of worldwide peace will be essentially (or generically) fulfilled in that the Assyrian-like/Egyptian-like superpowers of that time will submit to God's rule.

Zechariah, who lived in the late sixth-early fifth centuries BC long after the fall of Assyria in 612–609 BC, also employed the image of Assyria as an archetypal symbol. He envisioned a time when exiles would return from Egypt and Assyria, and the Lord would humble Egyptian and Assyrian pride (Zech 10:10–11). Whether or not the prophet was using a pre-exilic source, the fact remains that Assyria has to be an archetype in Zechariah's historical context. As a traditional enemy of God's people, it became a code word or symbol for the hostile nations that oppose God and his people.[35] Zechariah's use of archetypal language shows that contextualization sometimes involves utilizing powerful images from the past. Other examples of this "back to the future" technique include Isaiah's use of the second exodus motif (cf. Isaiah 11, 40–55) and the prophets' identification of the eschatological ideal king as the second coming of David (Isa 11:1–10; Jer 30:9; Ezek 34:23–24; 37:24–25; Hos 3:5; Mic 5:2).

---

[33] Francis I. Andersen and David Noel Freedman, *Micah* (AB; New York: Doubleday, 2000) 481.

[34] Commenting on this passage, Oswalt observes, "Assyria and Egypt stand for all the warring nations of the earth." See John N. Oswalt, *The Book of Isaiah, Chapters 1–39* (NICOT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986) 381. For a similar understanding of the language here, see Eugene H. Merrill, *An Exegetical Commentary: Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi* (Chicago: Moody, 1994) 278. Regarding Isa 19:23–25, he writes: "This obviously speaks of the universal dominion of YHWH when even Israel's erstwhile enemies will recognize and submit to his sovereignty."

[35] In response to those who want to date the oracle to pre-exilic times, Merrill argues that such a view is "insensitive to the particular lexicography of eschatological prophecy." He adds: "What must be done is to recognize that Egypt and Assyria here represent the universal distribution of the exiles of all ages. The combination or juxtaposition of Egypt and Assyria had become a cliché long before Zechariah's time. By far Israel's most persistent and hostile foes, these two nations epitomized bondage and exile throughout the OT tradition." He then compares Zechariah's use of these symbols with their use in Isaiah 19:23–25 (*Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi* 278).

V. DEUTERONOMY 18:21–22 AND UNFULFILLED PROPHECY

In Deuteronomy 18:21–22, Moses gives a criterion by which the people can determine if a prophet has not 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).[36] 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 especially Jeremiah 18; Jonah 3–4; Mic 3:12 cf. Jer 26:17–19). So how does one resolve the problem? Can the criterion of Deut 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.[37] But evangelical biblical theologians naturally are prone, and rightly so, to reject this explanation, given their view of the integrity of Scripture.

The briefly stated test of Deut 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.[38] The biblical evidence 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 Kgs 22:28; Jeremiah 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 (e.g. cf. 1 Kgs 21:19 with 22:38).[39]

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

---

[36] See Meier, *Themes and Transformations in Old Testament Prophecy* 212–13.

[37] This seems to be the approach of Carroll, *When Prophecy Failed* 185–88. He is overly critical of the Deuteronomic criterion and says that it has serious defects and oversimplifies the complexity of prophecy. He makes little attempt to show how it could have played an important function in certain contexts and situations.

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

[39] See Sandy's insightful and enlightening study of fulfilled prophecy in Samuel-Kings, in *Plowshares & Pruning Hooks* 136–51.

his criterion in Deut 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."[40]

Of course, an alternative option (which I tend to favor) would see the Deuteronomic test as applicable only in cases of unconditional prophetic pronouncements where contingency was ruled out by the "terms of the contest," so to speak. 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.[41]

VI. CONCLUSION

We can tackle the thorny problem of unfulfilled prophecy without being cut or scratched if we make allowances for the nature of prophetic language. It is vital to recognize three features in particular:

(1) Prophetic language is functional; it has a deeper function beyond being simply informative or descriptive. The prophets utilize a combination of expository and hortatory discourse to accuse their listeners of covenantal violations and to exhort them to change their behavior. They also employ predictive discourse to support their accusations and appeals. Expository-hortatory discourse has evaluative and dynamic functions, while predictive discourse can be dynamic or performative in function. When dynamic, it announces God's intentions conditionally and is intended to motivate a positive response to the expository-hortatory discourse it typically accompanies. In this case, the prophecy's predictive element is designed to prevent (in the case of a judgment announcement) or facilitate (in the case of a salvation announcement) its fulfillment.

(2) Given the dynamic nature of much of predictive discourse, it is clear (from passages like Jeremiah 18) that God's statements about the future are often conditional, whether marked as such or not. In such cases 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). Recognizing the presence of contingency often allows one to make sense out of prophetic messages that appear to have failed, such as the

---

[40] Pratt, "Historical Contingencies and Biblical Predictions" 188 (emphasis his). See also Meier, *Themes and Transformations in Old Testament Prophecy* 213.

[41] See Meier, *Themes and Transformations in Old Testament Prophecy* 213. With regard to Deut 18:22, he speaks of its "limited applicability" and concludes: "It is helpful only after the fact, separates out only some of the charlatans, cannot be used to disqualify a legitimate prophet from making oracles that are later revised, and is applied specifically only to an isolated oracle of a specific prophet."

promises of restoration in Isaiah 40–55, Huldah's prophecy of Josiah's death, and Ezekiel's prophecy of Tyre's fall. However, the principle of contingency does not entail that conditional, unfulfilled prophecies become obsolete. Often, as in the case of Mic 3:12, a prophecy is essentially fulfilled at a later time when the circumstances that originally prompted the prophecy reappear.

(3) Prophetic predictive discourse was contextualized, so that it would resonate with the prophets' audiences. The prophets spoke within the framework of their own time. This means that the language of contextualized prophecy may take on archetypal status and be fulfilled essentially, not exactly, especially when fulfillment transcends the prophet's time and context.

Once we recognize these features of God's prophetic word, we gain a new appreciation for how he chooses to run his world and for our role in the outworking of his plan. He is not the cosmic puppeteer who stands behind the heavenly curtain pulling strings attached to human looking puppets bouncing around on the stage of history in accordance with the divine script. On the contrary, he seeks to motivate the recipients of his prophetic revelation, grants them the dignity of causality, and speaks to them in language they can understand. His functional, contingent, and contextualized prophetic pronouncements reflect this relational dimension. When prophecy appears to fail, it is not because God or his word is flawed, but because God has made room for human choices and actions. Yet even then, a closer look reveals that these seemingly failed prophecies often live on and are realized in essence, demonstrating how the sovereign God, though flexible in his interaction with humankind, remains true to his standards and accomplishes his purposes.