

Historical Contingencies and Biblical Predictions:

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by Dr. Richard L. Pratt, Jr.

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

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

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

Historical Contingencies and Theological Considerations

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

¹⁰ Calvin, *Institutes* 1.17.1.

¹¹ *Westminster Confession* 5.2.

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

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

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

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

¹² *Westminster Confession* 5.2.

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

¹⁴ *Westminster Confession* 5.3.

Historical Contingencies and Predictions

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

For if you thoroughly carry out these commands, then Davidic kings who sit on his throne will come through the gates of this palace, riding in chariots and on horses, each one accompanied by his officials¹⁹ and his army.²⁰ But if you do not obey these commands, declares Yahweh, I swear by myself that this palace will fall into ruin (Jer 22:4-5).

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

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

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

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

¹⁹ Reading *w`bdyw (k^etîb)*.

²⁰ MT reads singular *hw' w`bdw w`mw*. G levels to the plural (ὁμοῦτοι ἕκαστος, καθένας ἑαυτῶν). I have rendered *hw'* "each one" to reflect the preferred singularity (*lectio difficilior*).

²¹ Carroll, *When Prophecy Failed* 33.

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

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

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

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

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

If you dramatically improve your ways and your actions and actually show justice to each other, if you do not oppress the alien, the fatherless or the widow, and do not shed²² innocent blood in this place, and if you do not follow other gods to your own harm, then I will let you live in this place, the land I gave your forefathers forever and ever (Jer 7:5-7).

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

²⁵ Jeremiah 22:5 combines divine oath with conditionality.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

If what a prophet proclaims in the name of Yahweh does not occur²⁸ or come about, that is a message Yahweh has not spoken. The prophet has spoken presumptuously.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

