

Hyper-Preterism and Unfolding Biblical Eschatology

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Hyper-preterism, the belief that the New Testament expectation of Christ's return in glory has already occurred, has taken at least two basic forms. On the one hand, it has become a fairly standard part of critical approaches to biblical faith as they have developed during the modern period. Critical theologians tend to reject the expectation of a future cosmic consummation of the Kingdom of God because they hold that modern rational people can no longer embrace such hopes. Their reflections tend to focus almost exclusively on what Christ has already done, rather than on what he may do in the future. On the other hand, hyper-preterism has also taken root in recent years within circles that are otherwise orthodox and evangelical. These theologians affirm classical views of biblical authority and build their distinctive views of the return of Christ on these assumptions of biblical authority. As strange as it may sound, these conservative hyper-preterists insist that belief in biblical authority requires believers to reject the notion that we are still waiting for a cataclysmic return of Christ. A central line of their reasoning has to do with their understanding of biblical authority and prophecy. In this article, we will explore the contours of this line of reasoning.

I. The Prophetic Argument for Hyper-Preterism

This aspect of the hyper-preterist argument may be summarized as follows.

- Biblical prophecies predict an imminent return of Christ.
- All biblical prophecies must be fulfilled as predicted.
- Therefore, the imminent return of Christ was fulfilled.

First, hyper-preterists typically insist that biblical predictions portray the return of Christ as an event that will take place quickly, within a generation after the resurrection and ascension of Christ. Second, they insist that belief in the authority of Scripture requires us to believe that all biblical predictions must be fulfilled just as they are stated. These affirmations lead to the conclusion that the return of Christ was fulfilled within a generation after the resurrection and ascension of Christ.

The premises of this argument are so central to hyper-preterism that if either of them proved to be false, the case for the conclusion would be significantly weakened. For the most part, opponents of hyper-preterism have argued against the first premise. They have challenged the idea that the Scriptures speak of Christ's imminent return. Yet, to my knowledge no critiques of hyper-preterism have focused on the second premise. No one has challenged the idea that biblical prophecies must be fulfilled just as they predict future events to be. In this article, we will explore whether all predictions made by true prophets must come to pass exactly as they are stated.¹ In many respects, questioning this premise may be even more important than challenging the first one. If prophecies do not have to be fulfilled precisely as stated, then it does not matter if the Scriptures depict Christ's second coming in close proximity to his first coming.

In this article, we will argue that hyper-preterists oversimplify this complex issue and arrive at a number of seriously misguided conclusions. In contrast to the hyper-preterist proposal, we will argue that biblical prophecies are seldom fulfilled exactly as they are stated. Therefore, even if the Scriptures did predict that Jesus' return would take place within a few years, his return could still be in our future, even more than two thousand years later.

From the start we should acknowledge that many Christians endorse the view on the fulfillment of prophecy taken by hyper-preterists.² Their outlook on prophetic fulfillment is largely based on Deuteronomy 18:22, where Moses warns against false prophets:

If what a prophet proclaims in the name of the LORD does not take place or come true, that is a message the LORD has not spoken. That prophet has spoken presumptuously. Do not be afraid of him.

¹ For a more detailed analysis of many aspects of the issues addressed here, see Richard Pratt, "Historical Contingencies and Biblical Predictions," available at www.thirdmill.org; id., *He Gave Us Prophets*, video series produced by Third Millennium Ministries and available at www.thirdmill.org; id., "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), 180-203.

² For example, Hengstenberg argued, "Viewing prophecies as conditional predictions nullifies them." Cited by Patrick Fairbairn, *The Interpretation of Prophecy* (2d ed., 1865; reprint, London: Banner of Truth, 1964), 61. Although John Barton Payne admits that there are some exceptions, he argues that "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).

It is quite common on a popular level for evangelicals to understand this passage to teach that everything a true prophet says about the future will come to pass.

To be sure, many evangelical scholars have been subtler in their interpretations of the verse,³ but little effort has been put into adjusting general perceptions of prophecy to account for these more subtle understandings.⁴ As a result, evangelicals seldom dispute the hyper-preterist interpretation of this passage.

We will return to look directly at Deuteronomy 18:22 later in this article. At this point, however, we should merely state that we will see how this interpretation is far too simplistic. Instead, we will observe that it is the very nature of authoritative biblical prophecies that fulfillments often differ significantly from predictions because of historical contingencies that intervene between predictions and their fulfillments. Historical contingencies such as fasting, repentance, worship, indifference, rebellion, and recalcitrance that occur after a prediction and before its fulfillment often move God to redirect history in ways that seem appropriate to him. These redirections always match biblical prophetic predictions when understood in the light of larger theological considerations, but they often do not match with an atomistic reading of what biblical prophets announced.

II. Contingencies and the Fulfillment of Prophecy

In light of the ways open theism is capturing the imagination of so many believers in our day, any mention of historical contingencies in a theological context raises questions about the relationship between God and history.⁵ For

³ See Peter C. Craigie, *The Book of Deuteronomy, NICOT* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976), 262-64. See also Duane L. Christensen, *Deuteronomy 1:1-21:9, WBC* (rev. ed.; Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2001), 410-11; J. G. McConville, *Deuteronomy, AOTC* (Downers Grove, 111.: InterVarsity Press, 2002): 303-4.

⁴ See L. Berkhof, *Principles of Biblical Interpretation* (1950; reprinted, Grand Rapids: Baker, 1973): 148-54. Olshausen declared, "None of the divine predictions are bare historical proclamations of what is to take place." Cited by Fairbairn, *Interpretation of Prophecy*. 60. Similarly see William W. Klein, Craig L. Blomberg, and Robert L. Hubbard Jr., *Introduction to Biblical Interpretations* (Dallas: Word, 1993), 306: "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." See also Willem A. VanGemeren, *Interpreting the Prophetic Word* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990), 58, 60, 301.

⁵ See these advocates of open theism: Gregory A. Boyd, *God of the Possible* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000); Clark Pinnock, Richard Rice, John Sanders,

this reason, we should distinguish our position from open theism by explicitly framing our discussion in terms of the traditional Reformed view of divine immutability and providence.

A. *Contingencies and the Sovereignty of God*

When we speak of historical contingencies affecting the fulfillment of prophecies, we have in mind a concept of contingency that complies with the emphasis of traditional Reformed theology on the sovereignty of God.⁶ In the first place, this study is built on the doctrine of God's sovereign immutability. Unfortunately, this doctrine is often misunderstood to teach that God is unchangeable in every way imaginable. But such an outlook denies the biblical portrait of God's ability to have meaningful interaction with the creation (to judge, redeem, answer prayer, become flesh, etc.). It is for this reason that Reformed theologians have distinguished ways in which God is immutable from ways in which he is not. For example, Louis Berkhof puts the matter succinctly:

The Bible teaches us that God enters into manifold relations with man and, as it were, lives their life with them. There is no change in His Being, His attributes, His purposes, His motives or actions, or His promises.⁷

We can summarize Berkhof's position by saying that Reformed theology has identified at least three ways in which God is unchanging: (1) God's character does not change; he cannot become something other than what he is. (2) God's covenant promises are immutable; he will not break his covenant oaths. (3) God is immutable in his eternal counsel or plan for all of history; God has an unchangeable plan, and this plan governs every detail of history.

William Hasker, and David Besieger, *The Openness of God* (Downers Grove, 111.: InterVarsity Press, 1994); John Sanders, *The God Who Risks* (Downers Grove, 111.: InterVarsity Press, 1998). For critiques, see John M. Frame, *No Other God: A Response to Open Theism* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: Presbyterian and Reformed, 2001); Bruce A. Ware, *God's Lesser Glory: The Diminished God of Open Theism* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway, 2000).

⁶ See J. Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, tr. Ford Lewis Battles, LCC (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), 1.16-18; Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology* (reprint, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975), 1:57S-616; Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (reprint, Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1998), 165-78.

⁷ Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 59.

This last sense of immutability is especially important for the purposes of our study. As the Westminster Confession of Faith puts 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" (3.1). Following this statement, we affirm in no uncertain terms that every event that takes place in history, even if it may in a secondary sense be called contingent, is nevertheless a part of God's eternal and immutable plan for the universe.⁸

In the second place, although it is important to affirm divine immutability, it is equally important to stress the Reformed doctrine of God's sovereign providence when dealing with the fulfillment of prophecy. The traditional Reformed doctrine of providence provides a framework for understanding the role of historical contingencies. The providence of God may be defined as God's active involvement in history as he sovereignly works out his eternal plan for the universe.⁹ According to the Scriptures, God does not simply have a plan that he watches take place as a distant observer; he is actively involved in history.¹⁰

The Westminster Confession faithfully reflects the teaching of Scripture in this regard. For our purposes, one aspect of its teaching on divine providence moves to the foreground:

Although in relation to the foreknowledge and decrees of God, the first cause, all things come to pass immutably and infallibly; yet, by the same providence, He ordereth them to fall out according to the nature of second causes, either necessarily, freely, or contingently (WCF 5.2).

We see here that the eternal decrees of God will not fail. He works out his immutable plan by ordering events so that they occur either necessarily (*necessario*), freely (*libere*), or contingently (*contingenter*). The proof texts associated with these three words in the Confession make the concepts here clearer.¹¹

⁸ I agree with Hodge when he says, "If He [God] has not absolutely determined what is to occur, but waits until an undetermined condition is or is not fulfilled, then his decree can neither be eternal nor immutable" (*Systematic Theology*, 1:540).

⁹ See G. C. Berkouwer, *The Providence of God*, tr. Lewis B. Smedes (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1952), 10, 35-37.

¹⁰ As Berkhof warned, "Divine immutability should not be understood as implying immobility. It is even customary in theology to speak of God as *actus purus*, a God who is always in action" (*Systematic Theology*, 59).

¹¹ See Gen. 8:22; Jer. 31:35; Ex. 21:13; Deut. 19:5; 1 Kings 22:28, 34; Isa. 10:6-7.

First, sometimes God orders history so that events occur necessarily (Gen. 8:22; Jer. 31:35). For example, some patterns of nature are so regular that we may speak of one thing necessarily causing another. The gravitational force of the earth causing a stone to fall to the ground is one example of such necessity.

Second, the Confession states that some events occur freely (Ex. 21:13; Deut. 19:5; 1 Kings 22:28, 34). In other words, they appear random from a human point of view. Shooting an arrow into the air at random and the like are ultimately under the control of God, but they seem, from a human vantage point, to be freely associated.

Finally, the Confession tells us that some things happen contingently (Isa. 10:6-7). Here the focus is on God's interaction with his volitional creatures. God works out his plan for history through the contingencies of angelic and, more importantly, human choices.

In line with this definition of contingency, we will argue that human choices play a major role in determining how biblical prophecies will be fulfilled. This proposal does not deny the immutability of God's eternal decrees, nor does it deny his providential control of all things. It merely follows the traditional Reformed teaching that one of the ways in which God works out his immutable plan is through historical contingencies.

B. Contingencies and Prophetic Fulfillments

With the contours of divine immutability and divine providence in mind, we are in a position to see how the contingencies of human choices often affect the fulfillment of prophecy. To explore this matter, we will describe the general pattern and then turn to some specific examples.

Jeremiah 18:1-10 provides a helpful overview of the place of contingencies in the fulfillment of prophecy. The chapter opens with a record of Jeremiah's observation:

This is the word that came to Jeremiah from the LORD: "Go down to the potter's house, and there I will give you my message." So I went down to the potter's house, and I saw him working at the wheel. But the pot he was shaping from the clay was marred in his hands; so the potter formed it into another pot, shaping it as seemed best to him (Jer. 18:1-4) .

God told Jeremiah to go to a potter's house, and so Jeremiah entered the potter's house. There he saw the potter working in one way with the clay and then changing his design when he saw that the clay had become marred. Once the

pot had become malformed, the potter worked with the lump of clay again, shaping it as seemed best to him.

Jeremiah's observation at the potter's house had an important symbolic significance:

Then the word of the LORD came to me: "O house of Israel, can I not do with you as this potter does?" declares the LORD. "Like clay in the hand of the potter, so are you in my hand, O house of Israel" (Jer. 18 5-6).

This passage uses the well-known metaphor of God as the potter.¹² God reserves the right to do with his people what seems best to him, just as the potter does with his clay. Of course, as we have seen, God never violates his immutable character, his covenant promises, or his eternal plan. Yet, within these parameters, God is free to vary the ways he handles his people.

In verses 7-10, God applies the analogy of the potter and the clay to a wide variety of predictions. These verses have several features that indicate that they do not apply to a narrow set of prophecies. Each sentence begins with an emphatically general temporal reference. The expressions "at any time" (*rgʾ*) and "at another time" (*wrgʾ*) emphasize that these verses do not describe exceptional situations, but a pattern to be expected in many situations.¹³ Similarly, the anarthrous expression "any nation or kingdom" (*ʾl gwy wʾl mmlkh*) also points to the breadth of prophecies in view. Moreover, these verses describe the two major types of prophetic prediction: judgment (18:7-8) and salvation (18:9-10). All prophetic oracles gravitate in one or both of these directions.

The effects of intervening historical contingencies on the fulfillment of announcements of judgment appear first:

If at any time I announce that a nation or kingdom is to be uprooted, torn down and destroyed and if that nation I warned repents of its evil, then I will relent and not inflict on it the disaster I had planned (Jer. 18:7-8).

In this context, the expression "I had planned" (*chshbty*) does not refer to the eternal decree of God, but to his providential declarations of intentions (note the

¹² See Isa. 29:16; 45:9; 64:8; Rom. 9:21.

¹³ This construction (*wrgʾ*) occurs only once in the Hebrew Bible. Holladay suggests "suddenly" as a translation (William L. Holladay, *Jeremiah: A Commentary on the Book of the Prophet Jeremiah, Hermeneia* [Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986-89], 1:517). It seems simpler, however, to translate the adverbs as "at one time" or "at some time" (cf. Isa. 26:20; 54:7-8; Ezra 9:8).

parallel with "I had intended" [*'mrty*] in 18:10). God says that he may announce judgment to come, but if there is an intervening historical contingency of repentance, then he may relent¹⁴ and the fulfillment may not take place as predicted. In a word, the historical contingency of human choice can make a difference in the way God fulfills a prophecy of judgment.

To show that this principle is not limited to predictions of judgment, God speaks also of predictions of blessing:

And if at another time I announce that a nation or kingdom is to be built up and planted, and if it does evil in my sight and does not obey me, then I will reconsider the good I had intended to do for it (Jer. 18:9-10).

Notice the parallel situation. At any time and with respect to any nation, God may announce the blessing of security and prosperity. Yet, he may relent from doing the good he intended (*'mrty*) if the people do evil. Jeremiah 18:1-10 teaches that God will react to the way in which human beings respond to threats of judgment and offers of blessing.

In terms of his providential involvement in the world, we come upon many biblical situations in which God watched to see how people reacted to the prophetic word, and then moved history in response to these human reactions. For example, in 2 Chronicles 12:5, we read Shemaiah's announcement of judgment:

Then the prophet Shemaiah came to Rehoboam and to the leaders of Judah who had assembled in Jerusalem for fear of Shishak, and he said to them, "This is what the LORD says, 'You have abandoned me; therefore, I now abandon you to Shishak.'"

Notice that Shemaiah did not offer any explicit conditions in this prophecy. When isolated from larger theological concerns that lie behind this passage, it sounds as if Shemaiah revealed an eternal, unchangeable decree of God. But Rehoboam and the leaders of Judah knew better. They hoped that these words

¹⁴ Apodoses are frequently jussive, imperative, and simple future. I render the apodoses of Jer. 18:8,10 modally ("I may relent"). Repentance and disobedience have only the potential of causing Yahweh to relent. Compare the apodosis of Lev. 27:27 ("he may redeem" [*yg'ŕ*]), which is certainly modal (cf. Lev. 27:28). Beyond this, the immediate context of Jer. 18:4 supports this view. The potter is not obligated to reshape the clay. The clay will be handled as seems right to the potter. See Terrace E. Fretheim, "The Repentance of God: A Study of Jeremiah 18:7-10," *HAR* 11 (1987): 82.

were just a warning from God of what he was going to do if they did not repent. So, we find in the next verse that "the leaders of Israel and the king humbled themselves and said, 'The Lord is just.'" When Rehoboam and the leaders of Judah heard the prophecy of judgment, they knew what to do. They were to call out to God in repentance and faith, seeking his mercy.

As we continue to read this passage, the intervening historical contingency of humble prayer had a dramatic effect on the fulfillment of Shemaiah's prediction. In fact, Shemaiah himself acknowledged this effect. In verses 7-8, we read these words:

When the LORD saw that they humbled themselves, this word of the LORD came to Shemaiah: "Since they have humbled themselves, I will not destroy them but will soon give them deliverance. My wrath will not be poured out on Jerusalem through Shishak. They will, however, become subject to him, so that they may learn the difference between serving me and serving the kings of other lands."

This passage makes clear that the purpose of Shemaiah's words was not to declare the immutable plan of God. If this had been the case, his prediction would have come about precisely as stated. Instead, his words warned of judgment that *might* come. He spoke not to condemn the people, but so that the people would hear this warning, repent, and then receive the grace of God. So, we see that the larger theological perspective of the role of human reaction made a significant difference in the way that Shemaiah's prophecy was fulfilled. In this case, Shemaiah's prophecy was not utterly reversed, but it was modified so that the defeat of Jerusalem was not as severe as it would have been.

A second example of the influence of human reactions to predictions appears in the book of Jonah. We know that God sent Jonah to the city of Nineveh to announce judgment to come. In Jonah 3:4, the prophet says: "Forty more days and Nineveh will be overturned." What could be simpler than this prophecy? Jonah announced that the city of Nineveh had only forty more days before it would be destroyed. There were no explicit conditions attached to this prophecy.

Even so, the king and people of Nineveh knew that the lack of an explicit condition did not rule out the potential influence of human choice. The king of Nineveh and the people, along with their animals, put on sackcloth and ashes in repentance of their sins. The king announced this decree:

Do not let any man or beast, herd or flock, taste anything; do not let them eat or drink. But let man and beast be covered with sackcloth. Let everyone call urgently on God. Let them give up their evil ways and their violence. Who knows? God may yet relent and with

compassion turn from his fierce anger so that we will not perish (Jon. 3:7-9).

Put simply, the significant intervening historical contingency of repentance took place before this prophecy was fulfilled. The people humbled themselves in repentance before the Lord. And what was the result of this historical contingency? In 3:10 we read these words: "When God saw what they did and how they turned from their evil ways, he had compassion and did not bring upon them the destruction he had threatened."

It is important to notice that Jonah himself understood the larger theological principle that human reactions could have significant effects on the ways threats of judgment are fulfilled. Jonah understood that God's reaction to Nineveh's repentance was not unusual. He later complained to the Lord in this way: "I knew that you are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love, a God who relents from sending calamity" (Jon. 4:2). Even as he gave his prediction, Jonah knew that God might show mercy. His immutable character led to the possibility that he might react to human responses. In fact, it was not until over one hundred years later that Nineveh was destroyed by the Babylonians.

From the general principle of Jeremiah 18, and these two out of many other examples, we see that the contingency of human choice may influence the ways in which biblical prophecies are fulfilled. Sometimes God reverses a threatened judgment or an offered blessing; sometimes he delays or hurries a judgment or blessing. He also softens some blessings and judgments; at other times he increases judgments or blessings. All of these and many more options are available to God as he interacts with human responses to the prophetic word. As a result, we must recognize that Jeremiah 18:1-10 contradicts the popular understanding of Deuteronomy 18:22. Jeremiah learned that true prophets often predicted things that did not happen.

C. Levels of Divine Determination

How should we reconcile the effects of intervening historical contingencies with Moses' test of a true prophet (Deut. 18:22)? Are these views compatible? We can bring these two concepts together by realizing that Moses and the people of Israel understood that prophets' words are not always to be taken as stating absolute certainties about the future. In fact, the prophets had ways of revealing that God had different levels of determination to fulfill predictions. It is important to remember that when the prophets indicated that God had high or low levels of determination to carry out a prophecy, they spoke of him in anthropomorphic language often associated with divine providence. With regard to his eternal, unchangeable plan, God always accomplishes all that he desires.

Yet in the course of historical involvement, God's determination to fulfill a prediction is sometimes relatively high and at other times relatively low.

God's determination varies along a continuum that we will divide into four parts: (1) conditional predictions; (2) unqualified predictions; (3) confirmed predictions; and (4) sworn predictions.

1. Conditional Predictions

In the first place, the prophets made a number of predictions that revealed that, providentially speaking, God had not yet committed to one direction or another. They did this by qualifying their predictions with explicit conditions. Explicit conditions in the form of "if ... then" statements appear many times in the Old Testament.

For instance, in Isaiah 1:19-20, we read this explicitly conditional prediction:

"If you are willing and obedient,
you will eat the best from the land;
but if you resist and rebel,
you will be devoured by the sword."
For the mouth of the LORD has spoken.

In this passage, the prophet Isaiah made it clear that the people of God had a choice. If they submitted themselves to the Lord, they would be blessed, but if they did not, they would be judged. Many times, the prophets stated conditions to let the people know that God was ready to use their choices as second causes to direct the course of history.

2. Unqualified Predictions

A second portion of the continuum of divine determination contains unqualified predictions. These passages are simple statements about the future. No explicit conditions appear in them.¹⁵ In such cases, the prophets revealed that at the moment of the prediction, God had a significant level of determination, an intention to take the future in a particular direction. Yet we know from the outcomes of these predictions that human responses could still turn events in a different direction.

¹⁵ It is important to realize that conditionality is not always marked in Hebrew. Thomas O. Lambdin reminds us that "conditional sentences in Hebrew may be virtually unmarked" (*Introduction to Biblical Hebrew* [New York: Scribner's Sons, 1971], 276).

We have already seen one example of this kind of prediction in Jonah 3:4, where the prophet says, "Forty more days and Nineveh will be overturned." There are no explicit conditions in this prophecy, and the prophet Jonah made it clear that God was determined to destroy the city. This was no mere possibility; it was a serious threat. Even so, the widespread repentance within the city of Nineveh caused God to delay his judgment against that city.

Covenant blessings also appear in the form of unqualified predictions. Listen to what the Lord told the prophet Haggai:

Tell Zerubbabel governor of Judah that I will shake the heavens and the earth. I will overturn royal thrones and shatter the power of the foreign kingdoms. I will overthrow chariots and their drivers; horses and their riders will fall, each by the sword of his brother. "On that day," declares the LORD Almighty, "I will take you, my servant Zerubbabel son of Shealtiel," declares the LORD, "and I will make you like my signet ring, for I have chosen you," declares the LORD Almighty (Hag. 2:21-23).

This passage makes it very clear that God was ready to destroy the nations surrounding Israel and to make Zerubbabel the king over his people.

There are no explicit conditions in this passage; however, we know that these things did not happen to Zerubbabel. He never became the king over God's people, and the nations around Israel were not destroyed. Why was this so? It was because the postexilic community failed to be obedient to the Lord, and this human contingency had the effect of postponing the fulfillment of this prophecy until Jesus, a descendant of Zerubbabel.

At times, predictions like these appear to be expressed in absolute terms, but Calvin's sober outlook is instructive. He says, "Even though the prophets make a simple affirmation, it is to be understood from the outcome that these nonetheless contain a tacit condition."¹⁶

Just because a prophecy appears to be unconditional, this does not mean that there are no conditions that affect its fulfillment. When we look at the fulfillments of many prophecies, it is evident that implicit conditions applied to them.

¹⁶ Calvin, *Institutes*, ed. McNeill, 1.17.14.

3. *Confirmed Predictions*

Old Testament prophets sometimes indicated that God had an even higher degree of determination to take events in a particular direction by showing that their words were confirmed. There are two primary ways in which Old Testament prophecies were confirmed. First, God indicated his higher determination with words; second, he showed his intentions with signs.

One example of verbal confirmation appears in the first chapter of Amos. Listen to what the prophet Amos says: "For three sins of Damascus, even for four, I will not turn back my wrath" (Amos 1:3). The words "I will not turn back" are repeated several times in this chapter. Why did God repeat these words again and again? He wanted to communicate that he had a high level of determination to carry through with these judgments.

But did this confirmation mean that there was no way to avoid the judgment of God? The prophet made it very clear that sincere and thorough repentance could still avert the wrath of God: "This is what the LORD says to the house of Israel: 'Seek me and live Seek the LORD and live, or he will sweep through the house of Joseph like fire'" (Amos 5:4,6). Amos 1-2 shows that God was highly determined to send his wrathful fire even against Israel, but this passage demonstrates that sincere and extensive repentance might still have an effect on the wrath of God.

Many passages in Old Testament prophecy are like this. The prophets indicated how highly determined God was by using words to confirm his determination. They did this in order to motivate their listeners to seek God earnestly and to repent sincerely.

Prophets not only added verbal confirmations of God's heightened determination, but also revealed higher levels of divine intention by coupling their predictions with signs.

Throughout the Old Testament, we find that prophets performed various signs and symbolic actions to make it clear that God had very high levels of determination to do certain things. When a sign accompanied a prophecy, it showed that God was very determined to carry out what the prophet had predicted.

One example of this practice appears in Isaiah 7. Isaiah warned Ahaz that he should trust God as the Syrians and the Israelites were coming against him. But Ahaz refused, and so God said to him, "Ask the Lord your God for a sign, whether in the deepest depths or in the highest heights" (Isa. 7:11). Isaiah offered the king confirmation that God would take care of him, but Ahaz hypocritically refused. So, God gave him a sign, but instead of being a sign of salvation, it became a sign of condemnation.

4. Sworn Predictions

Some predictions reveal in no uncertain terms that God is fully determined to carry out what he says through the prophets. These predictions take the form of divine oaths.

Often the words of a prophet simply announce that God has sworn to do something. For instance, in Amos 4:2 God takes an oath that the rich women of Samaria will be taken away by enemies:

The Sovereign LORD has sworn by his holiness:
 "The time will surely come
 when you will be taken away with hooks,
 the last of you with fishhooks."

Another oath formula appears in Ezekiel 5:11:

Therefore as surely as I live, declares the Sovereign LORD,
 because you have defiled my sanctuary with all your vile images
 and detestable practices, I myself will withdraw my favor; I will not
 look on you with pity or spare you.

When God adds an oath to a prophetic prediction, it raises that prediction to the level of a covenant's certainty. Yahweh's covenants provided certain expectations for the prophets and their listeners, because the language and rituals of covenants portray these events as divine oaths. It is well known that the cutting rituals described in several passages (e.g., Gen. 15:7-21; 17:9-14; Jer. 34:18-19), as well as the common expression "to cut a covenant," depict covenant-making events as rites of swearing.¹⁷ Associated terms suggest similar concepts.¹⁸ As Meredith Kline puts it:

Both in the Bible and in extra-biblical documents concerned with covenant arrangements the swearing of the oath is frequently found in parallelistic explication of the idea of entering into a covenant relationship, or as a synonym for it.¹⁹

When a prophet adds a divine oath to a prediction, it indicates that God is absolutely determined to do what he says he will do.

¹⁷ For summaries and bibliography on these topics, see M. Weinfeld, "*b^erith*" in *TDOT*, 2:253-79.

¹⁸ Josef Scharbert, "*'alah*" in *TDOT*, 1:261-66.

¹⁹ Meredith G. Kline, *By Oath Consigned* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1968), 16.

While it is true that God is utterly determined to carry out predictions qualified by oaths, there is still some latitude for God to react to intervening historical contingencies, because predictions never cover every detail of future events. First, the question of *when* often remains in the balance; timing can be influenced by the reactions of people who hear a prediction. Second, precisely *who* will experience what is predicted often remains flexible. Third, the *means* by which a prediction will come true is often left unspecified. Fourth, to what *degree* a prediction will be fulfilled always remains an open question.

Consider the oath of judgment found in Amos 6:8:

The Sovereign LORD has sworn by himself — the LORD God Almighty declares:

"I abhor the pride of Jacob
and detest his fortresses;
I will deliver up the city
and everything in it."

Although earlier in his book Amos left open the possibility of escape, it is clear at this point that he utterly condemns Samaria to destruction. Yet, it's also evident that this oath does not answer questions that still remain open. When will this happen? Will this destruction happen soon, or will it be postponed? Who or which people will die, be exiled, or escape? And by what precise means will God destroy Samaria? Indeed, to what degree this destruction must take place is open as well. These questions remain to be answered in the light of the reactions that the Israelites have. Their prayers and repentance, or their rebellion and defiance, could make a tremendous difference in the fulfillment of this prediction.

A similar situation holds true for divine oaths of blessing. For instance, in Isaiah 62:8, we find this oath made to those who have returned from exile:

The LORD has sworn by his right hand
and by his mighty arm:
"Never again will I give your grain
as food for your enemies,
and never again will foreigners drink the new wine
for which you have toiled."

It is clear from this passage that God swore to bring his people back to the Promised Land, so people could be sure that this prediction would take place. Still, there were questions that remained. When would God do this? Who would be brought back to the land? By what means would he accomplish this restoration? And to what degree would this restoration take place? In prophecies with oaths, these kinds of questions always remain open.

So, we see that the test of a true prophet in Deuteronomy 18:22 must be understood in light of the way prophets intended their predictions to be taken. As they indicated varying levels of divine determination, they also indicated what kind of claims they were making about the future. Thus, for prophecies to "take place or come true" (Deut. 18:22) meant different things for different kinds of predictions. Old Testament prophets indicated that God had different degrees of determination to direct the future in one way or another. Some prophecies explicitly indicated that they were conditional. Others were implicit in this regard. Words and signs confirmed still other prophecies. Finally, some predictions were confirmed by divine oaths. Israel's prophets passed Moses' test for true prophets so long as historical events took place that matched the level of certainty that their predictions offered.

III. The Purpose of Predictions

From the viewpoint of hyper-preterism, the predominant purpose of predictions in the Scriptures was prognostication. Hyper-preterists assume that prophets intended to give foreknowledge of things to come.

Now, there is an element of truth in this view. The prophets often revealed God's providential plan to go this way or that way. Yet, Moses and Israel understood that when prophets spoke words of judgment, the prophets usually did not utterly condemn to judgment, but simply *warned* of judgment. They understood that unless prophets indicated that a divine oath had been made, they did not promise blessing, but *offered* blessing. Moses' test of fulfillment would be applied differently to different kinds of predictions.

If it is a misconception to think that prognostication was the main goal of prophecy, what then was the main purpose for it? Simply put, prophets spoke of a future primarily for activation, not prognostication. Prophets did not want to *inform* their listeners about the future so much as they wanted to *motivate* their listeners to form the future.

To understand this outlook on prophetic predictions, it will help to look at the way Old Testament believers responded to the predictions of prophets. First, we will see what may be called the "Who knows?" reaction. Second, we'll see what may be called the "activation" reaction. These reactions of the people of God will help us see the goals of prophetic predictions more clearly.

A. *The "Who Knows?" Reaction*

Sometimes in the Old Testament, when people heard a prophetic prediction, they had a reaction that may seem strange to us. Instead of saying, "Now we know what the future holds," they said, "Who knows?"

This "Who knows?" reaction took place in three situations worth noting. First, when Nathan confronted David over his adultery with Bathsheba, he made this prediction: "But because by doing this you have made the enemies of the LORD show utter contempt, the son born to you will die" (2 Sam. 12:14). Nathan predicted that David's son would die, and he did. But David later explained to the people in his court what he was thinking after Nathan had made his prediction, but before the child had actually died:

While the child was still alive, I fasted and wept. I thought, "Who knows? The LORD may be gracious to me and let the child live." But now that he is dead, why should I fast? (2 Sam. 12:22-23).

Instead of accepting the prophetic word as inevitable, David still wondered whether the prediction could be averted through prayer and repentance. Time proved that his efforts were unsuccessful, for his son died anyway, but David's attitude was clear. Until the child died, David held out hope, the hope of "Who knows?"

In a similar way, the prophet Jonah told the people of Nineveh that judgment was coming: "Forty more days and Nineveh will be overturned" (Jon. 3:4). Once again, we might have expected the people of Nineveh simply to accept the prophet's prediction as inevitable, but they did not. Instead, they responded as David did. The king of Nineveh said, "Who knows? God may yet relent and with compassion turn from his fierce anger so that we will not perish" (Jon. 3:9). In this case, God did relent.

On a third occasion, the same reaction to prophecy takes place. In Joel 2:1-11, the prophet announced that a terrible judgment was coming against Jerusalem. Yet Joel nevertheless encouraged his listeners to repent with fasting and weeping (Joel 2:12-14). His reason for encouraging repentance is made clear in verse 14: "Who knows? God may turn and have pity." Joel was convinced that, so long as his prediction had not completely been fulfilled, it was good for the people to seek God's forgiveness. After all, no one could know just how God might react to that intervening historical contingency.

Old Testament predictions did not necessarily seal the fates of those who received them. Instead, their recipients rightly believed that it was possible for intervening historical contingencies — especially the contingency of humble prayer — to have significant effects on the fulfillment of prophecy.

B. The "Activation" Reaction

In addition to the "Who knows?" reaction, we learn about the purpose of prophetic predictions from the "activation" reaction. The prophets hoped to activate their listeners in at least two ways. On the one hand, the prophets knew that there was one way to ensure that a threatened judgment would take place, if not grow worse: the people merely needed to ignore the warning of a prediction of judgment. So, when prophets announced that God had decided to send a judgment, they generally hoped that the people would turn to God so that the judgment might be avoided. On the other hand, when prophets gave oracles of blessing, they knew that flagrant rebellion against God could remove the predicted blessing and replace it with judgment, but that continued faithful living would bring the offered blessing. The prophets gave their predictions of judgment and blessing to encourage their listeners to act in ways that would delay, lessen, and avoid judgment as much as possible, and that would accelerate, increase, and deliver the blessings of God as much as possible.²⁰

IV. Unfolding Eschatology in the Old Testament

Up to this point, we have noted that God often responds to people's reactions to prophecy by turning history in ways not precisely predicted in the prophetic word. At this point, we will take these basic dynamics of biblical prophecy and apply them to the eschatological hopes of Israel in the Old Testament. We will see that the eschatology of Israel developed in several stages as Yahweh's prophets presented expectations that were modified by intervening historical contingencies. These modifications of eschatological hopes in the Old Testament provide us with a frame of reference within which we may understand many aspects of New Testament prophecy concerning the imminent return of Christ.

A. Eschatology in Moses and Early Prophecy

Eschatology in Moses and Israel's prophets prior to the destruction of Jerusalem reveals a rather straightforward pattern. Their views developed out of the basic pattern of blessings and judgments in the Mosaic covenant. According to Deuteronomy 4:25-31; 28:1-30:10; and Leviticus 26:3-45, the judgments and blessings of the covenant would not simply come and go in endless cycles. Moses expected that judgments would increase as Israel went further and further

²⁰ In this respect then, the reaction of the church to the prophecy of Agabus was not out of accord with the way people responded to Old Testament prophecy. The main purpose of predictions was to activate people to respond, and this is what the church did (Acts 21:10-15).

away from God. This increase in judgment would culminate in the exile of Israel from the Promised Land (Deut. 4:25-28; Lev. 26:14-39). Moses predicted a terrible exile, but this exile would not be the end of the history of God's people. Repentance and forgiveness could change the situation. As Moses put it in Deuteronomy 4:29, "But if from there you seek the LORD your God, you will find him if you look for him with all your heart and with all your soul." Moses anticipated that once exile had occurred, the Israelites would come to their senses, repent, and find forgiveness from God. Then God would have mercy on his people and restore them to the land to enjoy a permanent state of unprecedented covenant blessings. The culmination of covenant blessings in the restoration is described in Deuteronomy 4:30-31:

When you are in distress and all these things have happened to you, then in later days you will return to the LORD your God and obey him. For the LORD your God is a merciful God; he will not abandon or destroy you or forget the covenant with your forefathers, which he confirmed to them by oath.

In this passage, Moses coined a technical term that would be used for generations to come as a description of the postexilic restoration. He said that the restoration of Israel would take place "in later days" or "in the latter days" (*b'chryt hyymym*; in LXX, *ep' eschato ton hemeron*). In most cases, this and related expressions simply mean "in the future." In this verse, however, we find the root of a more technical sense, referring to the time after exile as "the last days" or "the culmination of history." This technical use appears a number of times in the prophets (e.g., Isa. 2:2; Mic. 4:1; Hos. 3:5). In the New Testament, similar terminology appears in Acts 2:17; Hebrews 1:2; and James 5:3. In fact, we derive our theological term *eschatology*, meaning "the study of last things or last events," from the Greek translation of this expression.

We can summarize the expectations that Moses had for eschatology in this way: Moses anticipated that Israel would go into exile from the land. But once the people repented of their sins, they would be forgiven. And then, in the latter days, or the eschaton, they would be brought back to the land of promise and receive tremendous blessings.

This basic outlook of Moses was never forgotten in biblical history; it set the stage upon which eschatology unfolded in the Scriptures. The prophets up to the time of Jerusalem's destruction in 586 B.C. had eschatological perspectives that looked very much like Moses' original perspective. Old Testament prophets of this period spent much of their time rebuking sin and warning of the coming Exile (Hos. 4-5; Amos 3). They believed that forgiveness would take place during the Exile (Isa. 43:25-26; 44:21-22; Jer. 31:34). They also affirmed that a repentant people would be gathered back to the land of Israel for a great restoration (Jer. 31:1-25; 32:26-44; Ezek. 36:16-38).

Despite these similarities to the Mosaic pattern, the early prophets also made three major additions to Moses' portrait of early eschatology. They were concerned with kingship, the temple, and Gentile nations in ways that Moses did not anticipate. The restoration of the Davidic throne (Jer. 23:5-6), the rebuilding of the temple (Jer. 7:4; Ezek. 43:10-11), and the defeat and gathering of Gentiles (Isa. 2:2-3) were essential features of eschatology at this stage.

B. Prophetic Eschatology after the Destruction of Jerusalem

As we turn to the prophets who ministered from the destruction of Jerusalem in 586 B. C. to the end of the Old Testament period (ca. 400 B.C.), we see a significant shift in eschatology as God reacted to intervening historical contingencies. As we look into these developments, we will find outlooks on eschatological fulfillment that provide us with perspective on New Testament eschatology as well. We will touch on three issues: (1) the prediction and inauguration of restoration in seventy years; (2) Daniel's acknowledgment of the restoration's postponement; and (3) Haggai's and Zechariah's call to speed up the restoration.

1. Prediction and Inauguration of Eschatological Expectations.

In most respects, Jeremiah followed the pattern of early biblical prophecy. He announced that exile was coming to Judah and affirmed that a restoration would take place after the Exile. In two passages, however, Jeremiah added something not known before. He established an imminent eschatological expectation by announcing that the time of exile would be seventy years:

This whole country will become a desolate wasteland, and these nations will serve the king of Babylon seventy years. But when the seventy years are fulfilled, I will punish the king of Babylon and his nation (Jer. 25:11-12).

In a similar way, Jeremiah 29:10-11 says:

This is what the LORD says: "When seventy years are completed for Babylon, I will come to you and fulfill my gracious promise to bring you back to this place. For I know the plans I have for you," declares the LORD, "plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future."

As these passages make clear, Jeremiah predicted that the Exile would be over in seventy years.²¹ This prediction of the duration of the Exile indicates that as it was about to begin, the prophet predicted and expected an imminent end of the Exile and the introduction of eschatological restoration.

Other Old Testament writers indicated that this prophecy was fulfilled in their day, when some Israelites returned to the land in 539/8 B.C. According to 2 Chronicles 36:21-22, Jeremiah's prophecy of seventy years was fulfilled when the first returnees came back to the land under the leadership of Zerubbabel:

The land enjoyed its sabbath rests; all the time of its desolation it rested, until the seventy years were completed in fulfillment of the word of the LORD spoken by Jeremiah. In the first year of Cyrus king of Persia, in order to fulfill the word of the LORD spoken by Jeremiah, the LORD moved the heart of Cyrus king of Persia to make a proclamation throughout his realm.

Zechariah also confirmed this outlook:

Then the angel of the LORD said, "LORD Almighty, how long will you withhold mercy from Jerusalem and from the towns of Judah, which you have been angry with these seventy years?" So the LORD spoke kind and comforting words to the angel who talked with me... "Therefore, this is what the LORD says: 'I will return to Jerusalem with mercy, and there my house will be rebuilt'" (Zech. 1:12-16; see also 7:5).

So we see that the first level of prophetic eschatology after the destruction of Jerusalem focused on expectations that eschatological hopes would be imminently realized. Jeremiah predicted that it would take place within seventy years. The Chronicler and Zechariah indicated that the return of Israelites in the sixth century B.C. fulfilled that prediction.

2. Daniel's Eschatological Delay.

Jeremiah's expectation of a seventy-year exile prepares us to understand a second level of prophetic eschatology after the destruction of Jerusalem, namely, Daniel's additional insight into eschatology. Perhaps Daniel's most important contribution to prophecy was his famous vision of the seventy weeks of

²¹ See the helpful summary of comparative materials and bibliography in Thomas E. Comiskey, "The Seventy 'Weeks' of Daniel Against the Background of Ancient Near Eastern Literature," *WTJ* 47 (1985): 35-40. Seventy years was a standard sentence for rebellion against a god. See also E. Lipinski, "Recherches sur le livre de Zacharie," *VT* 20 (1970) 40.

years in Daniel 9. This passage is an autobiographical account of a revelation that Daniel received in 539 B.C., when Cyrus gave his edict for the Israelites to return to the land of promise.

In the introduction of 9:1-3, Daniel reports that he was reading the prophecy of Jeremiah about the seventy years of exile:

"I, Daniel, understood from the Scriptures, according to the word of the LORD given to Jeremiah the prophet, that the desolation of Jerusalem would last seventy years" (Dan. 9:2).

Daniel knew the first level of eschatological expectation announced by Jeremiah; he even recognized that he lived in Jeremiah's seventieth year. Yet instead of rejoicing in the certainty that the eschaton was about to be realized, Daniel turned to God in prayer:

"So I turned to the Lord God and pleaded with him in prayer and petition, in fasting, and in sackcloth and ashes" (Dan. 9:3).

In verses 4-19, we find a summary of Daniel's prayer that reveals his reasons for humble prayer. Jeremiah's seventy years were complete, but the people had not repented of their sins. As he says in verses 13-14:

Just as it is written in the Law of Moses, all this disaster has come upon us, yet we have not sought the favor of the LORD our God by turning from our sins and giving attention to your truth... [W]e have not obeyed him.

Daniel understood what we have already seen. Moses and the prophets had announced that exile would be reversed only when the people of God repented from their sins. But an unexpected intervening historical contingency had taken place. The Israelites had gone into exile, but they still had not repented of their sins. Israel's recalcitrance led to a major adjustment in the way that eschatological expectations unfolded.

The remainder of the chapter (Dan. 9:20-27) consists of God's response to Daniel's prayer. In it God revealed a shift in the way the restoration from exile was to take place. The angel Gabriel came from God with this message:

"Seventy 'sevens' are decreed for your people and your holy city to finish transgression, to put an end to sin, to atone for wickedness, to bring in everlasting righteousness, to seal up vision and prophecy and to anoint the most holy" (Dan. 9:24).

Simply put, Gabriel said that the Exile had been extended from seventy years to seventy weeks of years, or about 490 years. Because the people had refused to

repent, God decided to multiply the length of the exile by seven. The idea that God would cause a sevenfold increase of judgment against his rebellious people was already known from the covenant of Moses. For example, in Leviticus 26:18 God said, "If after all this you will not listen to me, I will punish you for your sins seven times over." Here, God applied this sevenfold increase to the Exile itself. He delayed the restoration of Israel for seven times seventy years.

This feature of Daniel's prophecies is important to our study because it indicates a second level of eschatology after the destruction of Jerusalem. At a time when other prophets were speaking of the imminent fulfillment of eschatological expectations, Daniel learned that the eschaton had been postponed because of a lack of repentance. As a result, the early postexilic community faced an anomalous situation. The imminent eschatological expectation of Jeremiah had been realized in part, but it had also been delayed.

3. Haggai's and Zechariah's Call for Eschatological Repentance.

With Daniel's prediction that the fulfillment of Jeremiah's eschatological expectations was delayed because of Israel's recalcitrance, we might expect prophets after him simply to resign themselves to a long period of suffering and trials. But that is not what happened. After the return from exile, Zerubbabel, Ezra, and Nehemiah led groups of Israelites back to the land with the hope of seeing the great blessings from God poured out quickly on the restored people of God.²²

The prophets Haggai and Zechariah were particularly important in opening these eschatological expectations to Israel as they ministered in the years 520-515 B.C. Although the returnees had initially been very enthusiastic about rebuilding the temple in Jerusalem as the center of the restoration of God's people, they had become discouraged and stopped their work. As a result, serious economic and political troubles began for the community. God sent Haggai and Zechariah to prophesy in these disappointing circumstances. They went about preaching repentance, and called for the people to return to rebuilding the temple, so that they could receive great blessings from God.²³

²² An interesting parallel appears in the inscriptions of Esarhaddon. After condemning him to seventy years of punishment, Marduk reduced the time to eleven years. For Esarhaddon's text, see Riekele Burger, *Die Inschriften Assarhaddons*, AFOB 9 (1956; reprint, Osnabruck: Biblio-Verlag, 1967), 15; *ANET*, 533-34. In much the same way, Haggai and Zechariah called Israel to repentance in the hopes that Daniel's judgment of seventy weeks of years might be shortened.

²³ Much the same may be said about the Chronicler's intentions. See Richard L. Pratt Jr., introduction to *1 and 2 Chronicles* (Fearn, Ross-shire: Mentor, 1998).

For example, the prophet Haggai offered a remarkable blessing to Israel in the days of Zerubbabel:

The word of the LORD came to Haggai ... : "Tell Zerubbabel governor of Judah that I will shake the heavens and the earth. I will overturn royal thrones and shatter the power of the foreign kingdoms. I will overthrow chariots and their drivers; horses and their riders will fall, each by the sword of his brother. 'On that day,' declares the LORD Almighty, 'I will take you, my servant Zerubbabel son of Shealtiel,' declares the LORD, 'and I will make you like my signet ring, for I have chosen you,' declares the LORD Almighty" (Hag. 2:20-23).

Haggai offered to Zerubbabel victory in conflict with Gentile nations and supreme kingship as God's vice-regent. This offer recalled the expectations of eschatological restoration that other prophets had announced for the house of David (Amos 9:12; Jer. 23:5-6; Isa. 9:6-7). In other words, Haggai offered the postexilic community eschatological blessings leading to the great Messiah, if the nation would repent.

In much the same way, Zechariah walked the streets of Jerusalem, offering magnificent blessings to the people of Zerubbabel's day as well. For instance, the prophet announced that God offered the glorious restoration of Jerusalem:

Proclaim this word: This is what the LORD Almighty says; "I am very jealous for Jerusalem and Zion, but I am very angry with the nations that feel secure. I was only a little angry, but they added to the calamity." Therefore, this is what the LORD says: "I will return to Jerusalem with mercy, and there my house will be rebuilt. And the measuring line will be stretched out over Jerusalem," declares the LORD Almighty. Proclaim further: This is what the LORD Almighty says: "My towns will again overflow with prosperity, and the LORD will again comfort Zion and choose Jerusalem" (1:14-17).

Zechariah's words recall the theme of Jerusalem's restoration, established by earlier prophets (Isa. 2; Ezek. 34-40). In effect, the prophet encouraged Zerubbabel and the postexilic community to repent and to serve God faithfully, so that these and other eschatological hopes could be realized.

These developments in Haggai and Zechariah form the third level of eschatology after the destruction of Jerusalem. Jeremiah's prediction of an imminent eschatological restoration was partially realized, and the prophecy of Daniel had made it clear that the lack of repentance had caused a delay in realizing the fullness of the eschaton. Then, the prophets Haggai and Zechariah called for repentance among the people of God so that the eschatological

blessings might come sooner rather than later. Just as they had been delayed by a lack of repentance, so they could be realized much sooner through the repentance of the people of God.

V. Historical Contingencies and New Testament Eschatology

While various interpreters have argued that the New Testament does not predict an imminent return of Christ,²⁴ hyper-preterists have collected an impressive number of passages that at least appear to indicate that New Testament writers predicted that Jesus was returning within one generation.²⁵ It is not our concern here to dispute hyper-preterists' interpretations of these passages, but we must dispute the inferences that they draw from them.

Simply put, because they are convinced that the New Testament proclaims an imminent return of Christ, hyper-preterists revise their understanding of the nature of his return in order to maintain the integrity of the New Testament.²⁶ They deny that the New Testament predicts a cataclysmic,

²⁴ See Anthony A. Hoekema, *The Bible and the Future* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979), 13-22, 109-28; Herman Ridderbos, *The Coming of the Kingdom* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1962), 498-510; id., *Paul: An Outline of His Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977), 489-97. For a sampling of the treatment of passages on the imminent return of Christ, see William Hendriksen, *Matthew, NTC* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1973), 244, 466-68, 867-69. I recommend the New Testament Commentary series by Hendriksen and Kistemaker for comments on the various passages cited by hyper-preterists.

²⁵ See "What Is the Preterist View of Eschatology?" at www.preterist.org. The article lists Matthew 10:23; 16:27-28; 24:34; James 5:8-9; 1 Peter 4:7 as key texts. Michael Fenemore, "The Timing Issue," at www.preterism.info, also lists Matthew 4:17; 23:36-38; Mark 13:29-30; Luke 21:28; Romans 13:11-12; 16:20; 1 Corinthians 7:27-31; 10:11; 1 Thessalonians 4:15; Hebrews 1:1-2; 9:26; 10:25, 37; 1 John 2:18; Deuteronomy 18:20-22. For book-length treatments in favor of full preterism, see J. Stuart Russell, *The Parousia* (1887; reprint, Grand Rapids: Baker, 1983); Edward E. Stevens, *Did it Happened in A.D. 70?* (Bradford, Pa.: Kingdom Publications, 1997).

²⁶ Citing the verses assumed to teach the imminent return of Christ, "What Is the Preterist View of Bible Prophecy?" (at www.preterist.org) states: "These verses have troubled Bible students, and have been used by liberal theologians to attack the inspiration of scripture. They reason that these passages were not fulfilled when they were supposed to be (the first century generation), so Jesus and the NT writers failed in their predictions and were therefore not inspired. But these verses point to Christ's coming in some sense in connection with the Fall of Jerusalem at 70 AD. So, Jesus' predictions were fulfilled. The final events of the redemptive drama came to pass in the first century within the apostles'

physical return and renewal of the heavens and earth, and they maintain instead that the return of Christ was spiritual in nature and took place during the first century.

As much as we may admire the desire to protect the integrity and authority of the New Testament, the hyper-preterist position is misguided. Even if the New Testament does predict an imminent return of Christ, intervening historical contingencies make it unnecessary that an imminent return take place. In fact, the manner in which eschatological expectations unfolded in the latter centuries of the Old Testament period indicates that an imminent return should not be expected.

Our proposal is that the New Testament eschatological expectations unfolded in ways that roughly parallel the three levels of eschatological expectation that developed among Israel's prophets after the destruction of Jerusalem. These three levels may be summarized in this way: (1) Jeremiah offered an imminent eschaton upon the assumption of repentance, and a measure of this expectation was realized; (2) Daniel came to realize that the fullness of the eschaton was delayed because of a lack of repentance; (3) Haggai and Zechariah called for repentance after the delay had begun, to hasten the fullness of eschatological promises.

The New Testament makes a similar presentation. (1) The initial eschatological perspective was that the blessings of the eschaton had been realized to some measure, and the imminent return of Christ was offered as a benefit of repentance. (2) The lack of repentance within the covenant community caused an indefinite delay of Christ's return. (3) Nevertheless, the hope and prayer of every true believer is that through their repentance and faithful living the return of Christ may be hastened.

There are many features of the New Testament that support this basic orientation toward the role of historical contingencies in the fulfillment of eschatological hopes. For the sake of convenience, we will point to three passages that focus on the ministry of Peter as examples of these eschatological expectations.

generation (before A.D. 70). Christ's kingdom is here now. Paradise has been restored in Christ (in a spiritual sense). We live in the Garden of Eden now (if we are in Christ), just as sure as we can know we have 'eternal life.' Bible prophecy absolutely makes sense when approached from this past-fulfillment (preterist) perspective! It puts emphasis on the spiritual nature of God's Kingdom, not the physical, materialistic, sensual, and sensational. It teaches a realized spiritual salvation in Christ and the Church now."

A. Early Expectations of an Imminent Return

Peter's initial eschatological perspective was at least twofold. On the one hand, he announced on the day of Pentecost that the eschaton had come:

These men are not drunk, as you suppose. It's only nine in the morning! No, this is what was spoken by the prophet Joel: "In the last days, God says, I will pour out my Spirit on all people" (Acts 2:15-16).

Peter explained that the outpouring of the Spirit at Pentecost was a realization of Old Testament eschatological hopes. His focus on this event as a fulfillment of the expectations for the latter days is highlighted by the fact that he shifted the language of Joel 3:1 to read "in the last days."²⁷

On the other hand, Peter's early presentation of the gospel in Acts 3:19-21 included the offer of an imminent return of Christ on the condition of repentance. Peter spoke to a crowd at the temple and sought to motivate them to repent by pointing to three benefits of repentance:

Repent, then, and turn to God, so that your sins may be wiped out, that times of refreshing may come from the Lord, and that he may send the Christ, who has been appointed for you — even Jesus. He must remain in heaven until the time comes for God to restore everything, as he promised long ago through his holy prophets.

The grammatical structure of Peter's words is revealing of his perspective:

repent ... turn	metanoesate ... epistrepsate
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> so that your sins may be wiped out 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> eis to exaleiphthenai hymon tas hamartias
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> that times of refreshing may come 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> hopos an elthosin kairoi anapsyxeos
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> and that he may send the Christ 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> kai aposteile ... Christon

Peter began with two imperatives, followed by three result clauses. He announced that those listening should repent in hopes of three results: (1) the forgiveness of sins; (2) times of refreshment; and (3) the sending of the Messiah. The first of these is easily understood. Repentance leads to the forgiveness of sins. The second expression, "times of refreshing," is more difficult. It could refer to the refreshment experienced by individuals through saving faith, or it could

²⁷ Joel 2:28 (3:1 in English) simply reads *whyh 'chry kn*, meaning "and afterward."

refer to the age of refreshment, the consummation of history.²⁸ The third result of repentance would be that God would send the Messiah. Peter made it clear that he had in mind the Parousia by speaking of Christ remaining in heaven "until the time comes for God to restore everything" (Acts 3:21), but he indicated that repentance would lead to this time of restoration. So, we see that one aspect of the gospel that Peter presented was the hope that repentance would lead to the return of Christ.

Peter's conditional offer of the blessings of the consummation served in the New Testament period in a way that was similar to the first level of prophetic eschatological expectation after the destruction of Jerusalem. Peter offered the imminent realization of the blessings of the Messiah as a possibility, but he also acknowledged that those eschatological hopes had been realized in part.

B. The Delay of Christ's Return

As the years went by, Peter faced a different set of circumstances. Rather than simply offering eschatological blessings to those who repented, he had to deal with the delay of Christ's return. It would appear that in the early years after Christ's ascension, the Christian community had high hopes for an imminent return of Christ. It is not surprising then that discouragement set in when years passed by without his appearance.

In contrast to hyper-preterism, however, the delay of Christ's return did not lead Peter to give up hope of a cataclysmic, physical judgment and renewal of the earth at Christ's return. On the contrary, Peter insisted that redemptive-historical precedent pressed the faithful to expect a disruptive, empirical, and physical return of Christ in glory:

They will say, "Where is this 'coming' he promised? Ever since our fathers died, everything goes on as it has since the beginning of creation." But they deliberately forget that long ago by God's word the heavens existed and the earth was formed out of water and by water. By these waters also the world of that time was deluged and destroyed. By the same word the present heavens and earth are

²⁸ Kistemaker says the phrase "signifies periodic seasons in which the forgiven and restored believer experiences the refreshing nearness of the Lord" (*Acts, NTC* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1990], 135). Kistemaker also lists as possibilities: the age of salvation offered to Israel if it will repent; the imminent return of Christ; and personal conversion in the present rather than future. While also recognizing the difficulty of the passage, F. F. Bruce favors the meaning "a respite from the judgment" pronounced on the Jews by Jesus (*Commentary on the Book of the Acts, NICNT* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1954], 91).

reserved for fire, being kept for the day of judgment and destruction of ungodly men (2 Pet. 3:4-7).

If Peter continued to hold to a cataclysmic return of Christ, how did he deal with the unexpected delay of this return? Interestingly enough, Peter dealt with this matter in ways that are parallel to Daniel's shift of eschatological expectations in his day. As Daniel observed the failure of an imminent, full restoration to be realized, he learned from God that Jeremiah's seventy-year expectation had been postponed because of a lack of repentance. In much the same way, as the postponement of the full restoration after exile was the result of Israel's lack of repentance, Peter revealed that Jesus had not returned because the New Testament covenant people had not repented. In 2 Peter 3:9 he insisted:

The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance.

In other words, Peter insisted that God was showing great patience toward the church ("with you") by waiting to send Christ back. He did not want "anyone to perish," but desired "everyone to come to repentance." Just as in Daniel's day, the lack of repentance was the reason for the delay of eschatological blessings.

C. The Call for Eschatological Repentance

Peter's approach to the delay of Christ's return was not simply to explain it as an act of divine patience in response to a lack of repentance. He also sought to use the delay of the eschaton as a motivation for faithful Christian living. Much as Haggai and Zechariah called for repentance and faithful living by offering eschatological blessings, Peter called for repentance by offering a hastening of the return of Christ:

Since everything will be destroyed in this way, what kind of people ought you to be? You ought to live holy and godly lives as you look forward to the day of God and speed its coming (2 Pet. 3:11-12).

Peter contended that the knowledge that Christ will return one day in cosmic judgment and blessing should lead to a godly way of life for believers. Like Haggai and Zechariah, he called God's people to "holy and godly lives" (2 Pet. 3:11). Moreover, like Haggai and Zechariah, Peter also made an astounding offer. When God's people repent and live in holiness, they "speed" (*speudontas*) the coming of the day of God.²⁹ Peter understood that the time of Christ's return

²⁹ Although *speudontas* may be translated as "wait and long" (*JB*) or "wait eagerly" (*NIV* margin), Kistemaker rightly argues that "the cumulative evidence from Scripture, intertestamental literature, and Jewish sources supports the first

had been immutably fixed; it is part of God's eternal decree. In terms of God's providential involvement in history, however, he also knew that it could be delayed or hastened. Just as he explained that the lack of repentance had delayed the consummation, he also explained that repentance and faithful living could speed the return of Christ.

Conclusion

In this essay, we have pointed to one flaw in the hyper-preterist approach to eschatology. Their assumption that biblical predictions must be fulfilled as they are stated runs counter to the overwhelming evidence of Scripture. Even though hyper-preterists may rightly point to some passages that predict an imminent return of Christ, the development of eschatology in the Bible demonstrates that this does not imply that Christ did in fact return in the first century. Much as Israel's return from exile was expected soon and realized in part, the New Testament teaches that the blessings of Christ's return were expected soon and realized in part. As Israel's glorious return from exile was delayed because of a lack of repentance, Jesus' glorious second coming was delayed because of a lack of repentance. Just as postexilic Israel was encouraged to hasten the blessings of the eschaton through repentance and faithfulness, so the repentance and faithfulness of the people of God today hasten the day of God as well.

In a word, hyper-preterists miss the central concern of biblical prophecies about the eschaton. They reduce the nature of Christ's return to a nebulous, relatively inconsequential spiritual return in order to defend a misconceived notion of the integrity of biblical prophecy. As a result, they fail to see the crucial fact that the radically cosmic, physical, cataclysmic eschatological vision of the Old and New Testaments calls believers in every century to serve Christ faithfully in order to hurry the day when he will return and renew all things. The eschatological hope of Christ's glorious, physical return has rightly inspired Christians throughout the centuries as they have suffered sickness, temptations, trials, prosecutions, and death. This hope still inspires us to remain faithful to our Lord today. As in the first century, Christ's imminent return is offered to us, and we too pray that he will fulfill that promise in our day.

"Yes, I am coming soon.' Amen. Come, Lord Jesus" (Rev. 22:20).

translation." The biblical evidence he offers is: (1) "Come, O Lord!" in 1 Cor. 16:22 and Rev. 22:20; (2) "Your kingdom come," in Matt. 6:10 and Luke 11:2; (3) evangelization of the world before the end comes, in Matt. 24:14 and Luke 14:23; and (4) Peter's own words in Acts 3:19-21 and 1 Peter 3:9 (*Epistles of Peter and Jude*, NTC [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1987], 337-39).