

THE CONDITIONAL NATURE OF PROPHECY: A VITAL EXEGETICAL AND HERMENEUTICAL PRINCIPLE

by

F. Furman Kearley, Ph.D.

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THE PROBLEM CONCERNING CONDITIONAL PROPHECY

The first and most significant problem concerning the conditional nature of prophecy is whether there actually exist any conditional prophecies. The second problem, which follows naturally, is how one may identify such prophecies, and how conditions may or may not affect them. There are at least three significant considerations concerning the conditional nature of prophecy.

The Apologetic Consideration

Evidence documenting the factions within Christendom related to the study of prophecy, and the extreme abuse and misuse of prophetic statements, is abundant. Two significant effects are evident from this division and abuse. First, many believers neglect the study of any prophetic material altogether because they are convinced that the prophetic messages cannot be understood—due to the fact that so many full-time students of the Bible differ so widely in their interpretations.

Second, many have been moved to the positions of infidelity, unbelief, and liberalism because the failure of Christian scholars to understand and interpret prophetic literature in a harmonious manner has convinced them that such literature could not possibly be inspired of God. C.A. Briggs has written an excellent summation of the reaction of some unbelievers and liberals to the literal interpretation of prophecy.

We are met on the threshold of Hebrew prediction with the bold statements of Kuenen, that Hebrew prediction has been proved false by history in so many particulars that the system cannot be regarded as true and divine. Its predictions have not been fulfilled in the time allotted them, and the fulfillment is no longer possible. The reverse of the predicted has often happened. Hebrew prediction has been disproved by events, and it must take its place with all other prophecy as a compound of truth and error, of blasted hopes and disappointed expectations (1888, p. 43).

On the other hand, within the household of believers there are two major systems of interpretation, neither of which is acceptable to the other (nor to liberals and skeptics). Further, both of these face major problems in explaining various prophecies (or their interpretations of those prophecies).

The first of these is the spiritualization of prophecies. This approach denies that the prophecies of the future King and kingdom of God ever had a literal meaning, and instead suggests that they had a higher spiritual meaning (finding fulfillment in Christ and the church). Thus, the prophecies were fulfilled in broad outline but not in specific, literal details. The major problem with this approach is that it often ignores the context and disregards the plain and easy meaning of the literal words in order to substitute instead broad, general relationships. Frequently it is quite difficult, if not impossible, to see any relationship between the literal words and the “spiritual” fulfillment. Peters offered a strong warning to the potential dangers of spiritualization:

The prophecies referring to the Kingdom of God, as now interpreted by the large majority of Christians, afford the strongest leverage employed by unbelievers against Christianity. Unfortunately, unbelief is often logically correct. Thus, e.g., it eagerly points to the predictions pertaining to David’s Son, showing that, if language has any legitimate meaning, and words are adequate to express an idea, they unmistakably predict the restoration of David’s throne and kingdom, etc., and then triumphantly declare that it was not realized (so Strauss, Baur, Renan, Parker, etc.). They mock the expectation of the Jews, of Simeon, the preaching of John, Jesus, and the disciples, the anticipations of the early Church, and hastily conclude, sustained by the present faith of the Church (excepting only a few), that they will never be fulfilled; and that, therefore, the prophecies, the foundation upon which the superstructure rests, are false, and of human concoction. The manner of meeting such objections is humiliating to the Word and Reason; for it discards the plain grammatical sense as unreliable, and, to save the credit of the Word, insists upon interpreting all such prophecies by adding to them under the claim of spiritual, a sense which is not contained in the language, but suits the religious system adopted. Unbelief is not slow in seizing the advantage thus given, gleefully pointing out how this introduced change makes the ancient faith an ignorant one, the early Church occupying a false position, and the Bible a book to which man adds any sense, under the plea of spiritual, that may be deemed necessary for its defense (1884, 1:167-168).

The other approach within the house of believers may be designated as that of futurization. This idea tends to take all of the prophecies whose fulfillment cannot be documented as having already taken place and project them into the future, saying that they are yet to be fulfilled. Advocates of this position insist that a literal fulfillment will take place at the Second Coming of Christ. Those who adopt this approach also encounter serious problems in fitting their interpretation to the specific prophecy in its original context since, that context often must be ignored or explained away in a manner as equally disturbing as the spiritualization approach employs to ignore the plain language of a given passage. Critics of the futurization approach have noted many significant problems in which futurization ignores the context and thus creates contradictions between the New Testament and the expectations of the future kingdom. The criticisms of this approach by Martin J. Wyngaarden are especially noteworthy (1955, pp. 70-82).

These problems, divisions, factions, and abuses (with their resulting unbelief and neglect) have been a source of great concern to me. Our Lord prayed that His followers would be united so that the world might believe that God sent Him (John 17:20-23). The chief roadblocks to unity in this area are differing religious and conflicting exegetical and hermeneutical principles applied by different religious groups. Unity can be achieved only if we read the Bible alike and apply the same principles of interpretation. Thus, this article is a plea for all to work diligently to attain unto the same principles of exegesis.

Further, our Lord said: “By this shall all men know that you are my disciples, if you have love one for another” (John 13:35). While evangelical “Christianity” may be a long time in arriving at the same principles of exegesis, it should not take any time at all for us to arrive at the practice of love toward one another and toward others as we continue to study and work for unity.

The Exegetical Consideration

The second important consideration concerning conditional prophecy must be whether it exists, and if so, what exegetical principles and considerations are involved. Patrick Fairbairn has addressed this issue with some significant questions about prophecy.

It indicates the future. Is the future in every case absolutely determined by it? Or, is room still left after it has uttered its declarations for human freedom to work, and according to the nature of the working, to give a corresponding turn to its prospective announcements? In a word, is it the characteristic of prophecy to make known certainly and conclusively what is to come to pass? Or, are its revelations to some extent conditional, depending on the line of conduct that may meanwhile be pursued by those to whom they are addressed?

This is a point of some moment for the right understanding of considerable portions of the prophetic Scriptures, and one that has called forth the most contradictory opinions.... The question rather is, whether prophecy, viewed simply as a word spoken in behalf of God by one class of men to another, ought to be regarded as announcing what is fixed and conclusively determined by God—his irreversible decrees? Or, whether it should not to some extent, and if in some, then to what extent, be viewed as the proclamation of God’s mind respecting his future dealings, on the supposition of the parties interested standing in a certain relationship to his character and government. In this last case the word might assuredly be expected to take effect, in so far as the relations contemplated in the prophecy continued; but in the event of a change entering in the one respect, then a corresponding change in the other might reasonably be looked for (1874, pp. 70-71).

Fairbairn mentioned that the problem of conditional prophecy has resulted in “contradictory opinions.” Indeed, this is so. Some scholars such as Hengstenberg, Stillingfleet, and others almost completely reject the concept of conditional prophecies (1874, pp. 72,489-493). Others, though acknowledging (of

necessity) that there have been some conditional prophecies, place drastic limitations on the concept and insist that such prophecies are the exception rather than the rule. These scholars limit conditional prophecies basically to those where Scripture expressly states the conditions (see Peters, 1884, 1:176). Berkhof limited conditional prophecy to those prophecies relating to the prophets' contemporaries and the near future (1952, p. 150). He suggested "that a prophecy may be conditional, though the condition is not expressed."

On the other hand, some scholars argue that the conditional element in prophecy is much more extensive. Fairbairn identified two major classes of prophecies. The first class contains those that "disclose God's purposes of grace to men, and indicate in its grander outlines their appointed course of development." This class he designated as absolute or unconditional prophecies. Examples would include the ultimate triumph of woman's seed over the tempter, and God's promise to bless all the families of the Earth through the seed of Abraham.

Fairbairn also recognized a second class designated as conditional prophecies. He described and defined these prophecies as:

those which by means of promise or threatening placed the subjects of divine revelation under the peculiar training of heaven. Here we find from the sacred records that the conditional element has often, as a matter of fact, been strikingly exhibited; and it must always, we conceive, be virtually if not formally and expressly found intermingling itself with prophetic intimations of the kind in question (1874, pp. 74-92).

H.L. Ellison proclaimed conditional prophecy to be the rule rather than the exception when he said: "Except where a promise is confirmed by God's oath (Genesis 22:16; Psalm 105:9; Hebrews 6:13) we are safe in concluding that every statement of God about the future has some element of the conditional in it, something ancient Israel was as unwilling to believe as we are" (1956, p. 103). Albertus Pieters contended that all the prophecies concerning the restoration and glorification of the nation of Israel were conditional and applied to the period following the Babylonian exile (1950, pp. 125-127). Some scholars seem to take a position that **all** prophecy is conditional. Kirkpatrick stated: "All prophecy is conditional, and the realization of the promises with which Isaiah was charged depended upon the attitude of the people" (1897, p. 198).

Indeed, there does appear to be some controversy concerning the existence and extent of conditional prophecy. Considerable study and prayer are essential to solving the problem of the exegetical consideration. The problem is not so much whether there exist some conditional prophecies; nearly all contemporary evangelical scholars acknowledge this. The problem is how one may determine which prophecies (or what parts of a prophecy) are conditional, and which are not. The question is: Can a study of the conditional prophecies establish some principles with which all can agree—in order to serve as a basis for exegesis?

The Hermeneutical Consideration

If conditional prophecies do exist, and if exegetical principles can be determined, then the hermeneutical consideration becomes extremely important. One would be able to determine: (a) whether these prophecies under consideration have any further application to us today; or (b) whether they will have any application in the future. In order to solve the exegetical and hermeneutical problem, and in order to develop a stronger apologetic case for prophecy, it is essential to study the case for conditional prophecies.

THE CASE FOR CONDITIONAL PROPHECIES

The Principle of Conditional Prophecy is Announced Forcefully

The case for conditional prophecy must begin with the most explicit, the most extensive, and the most generic statement of the principle as found in Jeremiah 18:1-12.

The word which came to Jeremiah from Jehovah, saying, Arise, and go down to the potter's house, and there I will cause thee to hear my words. Then I went down to the potter's house, and, behold, he was making a work on the wheels. And when the vessel that he made of the clay was marred in the hand of the potter, he made it again another vessel, as seemed good to the potter to make it. Then the word of Jehovah came to me, saying, O house of Israel, cannot I do with you as this potter? saith Jehovah. Behold, as the clay in the potter's hand, so are ye in my hand, O house of Israel. At what instant I shall speak concerning a nation, and concerning a kingdom, to pluck up and to break down and to destroy it; if that nation, concerning which I have spoken, turn from their evil, I will repent of the evil that I thought to do unto them. And at what instant I shall speak concerning a nation, and concerning a kingdom, to build and to plant it; if they do that which is evil in my sight, that they obey not my voice, then I will repent of the good, wherewith I said I would benefit them. Now therefore, speak to the men of Judah, and to the inhabitants of Jerusalem, saying, Thus saith Jehovah: Behold, I frame evil against you, and devise a device against you: return ye now every one from his evil way, and amend your ways and your doings. But they say, It is in vain; for we will walk after our own devices, and we will do every one after the stubbornness of his evil heart.

It seems evident that this pronouncement by Jeremiah was of the most general nature. He said, “At what instant”—that is, at what time or whenever God speaks. Jeremiah identified the object of God’s speaking as “concerning a nation, and concerning a kingdom.” The prophet identified the subject as having to do with destroying the nation or building it up. Thus, whenever God speaks of promises or blessings to a nation, He is speaking conditionally. The Bible is abundant in prophecies concerning Egypt, Babylon, Assyria, and many other nations. In the light of Jeremiah’s general statement, whenever God spoke concerning these nations, His statements were conditioned according to the principle of interpretation stated by the Bible itself. Israel and Judah also were nations. Thus, when God spoke concerning them, His promises were conditional unless there was some clear statement in the context to indicate otherwise.

This statement by Jeremiah, however, does not include times when God speaks concerning His eternal purpose or His eternal kingdom. These kinds of statements are not governed by Jeremiah’s exegetical principle.

The Principle of Conditional Prophecy is Illustrated Frequently

First, prophecies and promises made to individuals contain explicit statements of conditions. When God sent the prophet Ahijah to inform Jeroboam that He would give him the northern kingdom and establish his house, the Lord made clear it was conditional by saying:

And it shall be, if thou wilt hearken unto all that I command thee, and wilt walk in my ways, and do that which is right in mine eyes, to keep my statutes and my commandments, as David my servant did; that I will be with thee, and will build thee a sure house, as I built for David, and will give Israel unto thee (1 Kings 11:38).

Likewise, when the Lord appeared to Solomon at the beginning of his reign, God promised to lengthen his days if he would walk in God’s ways and keep His commandments (1 Kings 3:14). After the dedication of the temple, the Lord appeared to Solomon and told him that if he would keep God’s statutes, He would establish Solomon’s throne over Israel forever (1 Kings 9:4-5). When Solomon sinned against the Lord and the Lord became angry with him, He indicated that His actions of punishment were because Solomon had not met the conditions. God said:

Forasmuch as this is done of thee, and thou hast not kept my covenant and my statutes, which I have commanded thee, I will surely rend the kingdom from thee, and will give it to thy servant (1 Kings 11:11).

In the same context that contained God's promises to Solomon after the dedication of the temple, God indicated that the temple would continue to stand only if His statutes and commandments were obeyed. God said to Solomon:

But if ye shall turn away from following me, ye or your children, and not keep my commandments and my statutes which I have set before you, but shall go and serve other gods, and worship them; then will I cut off Israel out of the land which I have given them; and this house, which I have hallowed for my name, will I cast out of my sight; and Israel shall be a proverb and a byword among all peoples. And though this house is so high, yet shall every one that passeth by it be astonished, and shall hiss; and they shall say, Why hath Jehovah done thus into this land, and to this house? and they shall answer, Because they forsook Jehovah their God, who brought forth their fathers out of the land of Egypt, and laid hold on other gods, and worshipped them, and served them: therefore hath Jehovah brought all this evil upon them (1 Kings 9:6-9).

In this passage, the conditional nature of the prophecy was not limited to merely his contemporaries or to the near future. Standard exegesis would understand "ye or your children" to apply to any future generation of Israel. Certainly twenty generations had passed before the temple was destroyed in 586 B.C. Yet this statement included the wicked generation that brought about the destruction of the temple.

Second, many of the prophetic statements were stated specifically in conditional terms and their context indicated that this conditionality was the rule rather than the exception, especially as it related to promised blessings or stated threats. Isaiah 1:19-20 states general conditions that were to be implied in all of Isaiah's prophecies concerning the Hebrew nation: "If ye be willing and obedient, ye shall eat the good of the land: but if ye refuse and rebel, ye shall be devoured with the sword; for the mouth of Jehovah hath spoken it."

Jeremiah made several prophecies with explicit conditions, and many others which implied that if repentance were forthcoming, the Babylonian destruction would be set aside. In Jeremiah 17:19-27, the prophet indicated that if the people would hallow the Sabbath day, then the city of Jerusalem would remain forever with its inhabitants and with a king sitting on the throne of David. In Jeremiah 22:1-8, the prophet indicated that if the king sitting on the throne of David would execute justice and righteousness, then there would be one continually reigning on the throne of David. But if they would not hear, those of

the house of David would become a desolation. In 26:1-15, Jeremiah's speech concerning the temple is conditional. If the people would not listen to God's servants (the prophets), then the temple would be made like Shiloh and the city would be made a curse. In Jeremiah 38:17-18, the prophet indicated to Zedekiah that if he would surrender to Babylon, the city would be spared. But if he would not, the city would be burned with fire and Zedekiah would not escape. In Jeremiah 42:10-17, the people who remained in the land were told that if they would continue to stay there, God would bless them and care for them.

Surely, these kinds of statements flavor the entire message of Jeremiah with a conditional nature. Indeed, all other specific, similar prophecies in Jeremiah must carry the same kind of conditions, especially in light of the fact that Jeremiah announced the conditional principle as an exegetical principle by which people might understand his message. Certainly, the prophecies in Jeremiah 45-52 are conditional, since they concerned nations and kingdoms. Likewise, most of the rest of the book of Jeremiah concerned the nation of Judah, and similarly is conditional. Zechariah 7:8-14 makes it clear that the entire general scope of God's message through His prophets before the captivity was of a conditional nature.

Zechariah's statement indicates that God sent His former prophets to warn the people to live righteously and not to practice wickedness. It further indicates that if the people had listened to the prophets, they would not have gone into captivity. Since they did not listen to the prophets, however, they were punished for their sin.

The passages describing the reasons for the Assyrian/Babylonian captivity also make clear the conditional nature of the general messages of the prophets. The text in 2 Kings 17:13-14 states:

Yet Jehovah testified unto Israel, and unto Judah, by every prophet, and every seer, saying, Turn ye from your evil ways, and keep my commandments and my statutes, according to all the law which I commanded your fathers, and which I sent to you by my servants the prophets. Notwithstanding, they would not hear, but hardened their neck, like to the neck of their fathers, who believed not in Jehovah their God. And they rejected his statutes, and his covenant that he made with their fathers.

Clearly, the intent of the message of each prophet was to convince the people to repent so that the threatened punishment might not come upon them and the promised blessings would ensue. The same is true with the passage in 2 Chronicles 36:11-21 that describes the reason for the Babylonian captivity. Clearly,

these passages indicate that if the people had listened to God's prophets, the punishments and destruction foretold by the prophets would not have come upon them.

The Principle of Conditional Prophecy is Taught in the Multitude of "If-Then" Promise/Threats

The Bible abounds in various "if-then" passages that clearly indicate the conditional nature of God's statements. Leviticus 26 is one such passage. In 26:3, God began by saying: "If ye walk in my statutes, and keep my commandments, and do them; then...." In verses 4-13, God enumerated the blessings He would bring upon them for obedient service. However, in verse 14, He stated the converse: "If ye will not hearken unto me, and will not do all these commandments...." Then, in verses 16-45, God enumerated the punishments and chastisements He would bring upon them for their disobedience. Deuteronomy 28 is an even more famous example of such promise/threat passages (see also Deuteronomy 7:12-16 and Deuteronomy 11:26-28).

The Principle of Conditional Prophecy is Taught in the Cancelled Promised Blessings

God cancelled His promised blessings to Eli because of sin:

I said indeed that thy house, and the house of thy father, should walk before me forever: but now Jehovah saith, Be it far from me; for them that honor me I will honor, and them that despise me shall be lightly esteemed (1 Samuel 2:30).

This promise had been made to the house of Eli's father. This is most likely a reference to the promise made to Aaron and his sons, Eleazar and Ithamar. Eli was a descendent of Ithamar. God's statement to the father of Eli had been His intent, but it obviously was conditioned by the behavior of the future generations. Fairbairn observed: "God never meant that the promise of blessing should hold good in all circumstances" (1874, p. 90).

God's promises unto Abraham certainly were of an absolute nature. Yet they were conditional since they could apply to any given generation. God promised to give the land of Canaan unto Abraham's seed in a generic way. Specifically, He promised to give the land of Canaan to the generation who were slaves in Egypt and whom He brought out of Egypt (Exodus 33:1-3). Yet, when this generation sinned against

God, He did not hesitate to revoke His promise (Numbers 14:34) and to lead the next generation into the land of Canaan.

A study of Deuteronomy 7:12-16 indicates that even some aspects of the covenant promises were conditional. Generically, God promised to keep the covenant with that generation which He had sworn to their fathers. Specifically, He indicated He would enable them to consume or drive out all the nations in Canaan. Yet Judges 2:1-3 indicates that, at times, these nations were not driven out because of the sin of the people and that God was justified in not keeping His covenant with them because they had not kept their covenant with Him.

The Principle of Conditional Prophecy is Proved by Subsequent Events

In quite a number of instances, there are prophecies in the Bible that contain no direct, or even implied, statement of condition. Yet subsequent events proved that they were conditional from the beginning.

First, consider the prophecies that were made against nations or cities, the most famous of which is Jonah's prophecy against Nineveh: "Yet forty days and Nineveh shall be overthrown" (Jonah 3:4). We know from the information in Jonah 3:9-10 that when the people repented of their evil, God revoked His pronounced destruction and did not destroy the city. This is a perfect illustration of the principle announced in Jeremiah 18. We also know from the information in Jonah 4 that Jonah knew when he was first called that God would forgive and save Nineveh if the people would repent. Some scholars, commenting on this situation, have suggested that this is an example of a delayed prophecy, not a cancelled one. However, I can see no justification for this position. The people repented in the time of Jonah and were saved because of their repentance. Had the people continued to be righteous rather than return to sin, the city never would have been destroyed. The destruction announced in the book of Nahum was due to subsequent sins of later generations, not forgiven sins of the earlier generation.

An even stronger example and case for conditional prophecy is contained in one of Micah's prophecies: "Therefore shall Zion for your sake be plowed as a field, and Jerusalem shall become heaps, and the mountain of the house as the high places of a forest" (3:12). There is nothing in the immediate context to

indicate that this was a conditional pronouncement. However, a subsequent, inspired interpretation informs us that it was a conditional prophecy. The king and people of Jerusalem repented; God therefore set aside the pronouncement made by Micah and did not destroy Jerusalem. Jeremiah 26:16-19 relates that the enemies of Jeremiah were attempting to put him to death for prophesying of the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple. Others, however, cited Micah's prophecy and how Hezekiah feared the Lord and prayed for the city. Jehovah heard Hezekiah and repented of the evil He had pronounced.

Again, some would contend this is only a delayed prophecy rather than a cancelled prophecy. However, this reasoning does not follow. Had the Jews remained faithful and loyal to God from Hezekiah's time on, the city never would have fallen. When Jerusalem was punished (via destruction at the hands of the Babylonians), it was for sins committed by that present generation and by the preceding generations since the time of Hezekiah, particularly those sins in which Manasseh was the leader.

Similar examples may be cited concerning individuals. God's promise to David in 2 Samuel 7:8-17 sounds unconditional. David himself knew it was conditional, and even indicated that some further revelation had been made known to him about it by quoting it to Solomon (1 Kings 2:1-4) as he exhorted Solomon to keep God's commandments so the promise could be fulfilled. This additional revelation to David seems to have been in the passage now recorded as Psalm 132:11-12.

Elijah's prophecy of doom to Ahab and his house was uttered without the statement of any condition (1 Kings 21:17-29). However, when Ahab repented, God then delayed the execution of the prophecy for another twelve or more years.

Isaiah's announcement that Hezekiah would die seemed final. Yet, when Hezekiah turned and prayed to the Lord, the Lord changed His pronouncement and added fifteen years to Hezekiah's life (2 Kings 20:1-7). Surely, then, a prophetic promise of blessing did not have to **contain** a conditional statement in order to **be** a conditional prophecy. Rather, it seems evident that it was the general rule that a promised blessing, or threat of punishment, was conditional unless something specific was said or done to make clear that it was not.

The Principle of Conditional Prophecy is in Perfect Harmony with the Nature of God

The nature of God, as proclaimed in the decalogue of His characteristics, is “a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abundant in lovingkindness and truth; keeping lovingkindness for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression in sin; and that will by no means clear the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children, and upon the children’s children, upon the third and upon the fourth generation” (Exodus 34:6-7).

In short, the Lord is the perfect blending of justice and mercy. It is His nature to give sinners every opportunity to repent and, when they repent, to forgive them. Thus, it is natural that His prophecies, His promises, and His threats should all be conditional (except those that pertain to His ultimate sovereignty and scheme of redemption). Many times in Scripture it is noted that God repented of evil He intended to do, or repented of blessings He intended to bestow (Genesis 6:6, Jeremiah 18:8-10; 26:3,13,19; Joel 2:13-14; Psalm 106:45). Concerning the harmony of conditional prophecies with the nature of God, J. Barton Payne made the following excellent observation:

Scripture distinguishes a special class of revelations whose accomplishment is made contingent upon the fulfillment by men of certain conditions, which are equally God-given. That is to say, God is no changeless, impersonal force but reacts rather, in a living way, to the responses that are made by human persons. In Exodus 9:15, for example, His own words document the reality of divine change, since they foretell what He might have done, but did not because of one man’s intercession: “For now I had put forth My hand, and smitten thee (Moses) and thy people with pestilence, and thou hadst been cut off from the earth” (cf. 2 Kings 20:1-5). It is not that God’s standards, His decrees, or His nature are changeable; it is, in fact, the very immutability of the character of deity which necessitates the application of differing aspects of His fixed principles, in accordance with such changes as may be exhibited by fickle men. Prophecy in particular has been designed by God for moral ends, so as to motivate men into conformity with divine holiness. Should men, therefore, seek to take advantage of its holy assurances, toward non-moral ends (e.g. as in Jeremiah 7:4, 8-10, or Micah 3:11), change becomes then not only possible but inevitable (1973, p. 62).

On this point, Fairbairn agreed.

But alternations of this sort, so far from bespeaking God to be capricious in his ways and changeable in the principles of his government, rather serve to manifest him in what alone is essential, as unalterably the same. Directing his procedure in accordance with the principles of righteousness, he must change his dealings toward men when their relation to him has become changed; since otherwise there would be only an apparent uniformity, but a real diversity (1874, p. 82).

The Principle of Conditional Prophecy is in Harmony with the Purpose of Prophecy

According to Zechariah 7, 2 Kings 17, 2 Chronicles 36, and many other passages, one of the chief purposes, if not the most significant purpose, of prophecy was to motivate men to repent of sin and turn

toward God so He might bless them instead of punish them. Since this was the purpose of prophecy, it was essential that the prophetic pronouncement of punishment or blessing be conditional—i.e., depending upon the reaction of the hearers. This is exactly the principle that Jeremiah stated in Jeremiah 18. On this point, Olshausen wrote: “None of the divine predictions are bare historical proclamations of what is to take place; they are alarms calling men to repentance, of which it may be said, that they announce something for the very purpose that what is announced may not come to pass” (1874, p. 72).

The Principle of Conditional Prophecy is in Harmony with the Nature of Mankind

This principle is so obvious it hardly needs to be stated. Man’s history is the history of sin and suffering, then repentance and blessing. Thus, man needs the justice and mercy of God. A man might be righteous and obedient, with God promising him great blessings; however, it would be unfair and unjust to continue these blessings when he has turned to sin and rebellion. On the other hand, man might be wicked and sinful, but it is the height of God’s grace and mercy to forgive him and bless him when he repents. Mankind, then, needs conditional prophecies because of his own contingencies and vacillations.

What can be said of men as individuals also applies to entire nations. Nations, as a whole, can be righteous when promised certain blessings, but then turn evil; or they can be evil when threatened, and then repent and become righteous. Thus, conditional prophecies are well suited to the nature of both individuals and nations.

From the foregoing principles and illustrations, the evidence is overwhelmingly convincing that conditional prophecy is more the rule than the exception in the Bible. This is not to say that there are not many absolute or unconditional prophecies as well. A strong case can be made for these, and an examination of them is valuable (but beyond the scope of this study). However, since the case for conditional prophecy has been established, it now is in order to consider the implications of conditional prophecy for exegesis and hermeneutics.

THE IMPLICATIONS OF CONDITIONAL PROPHECY FOR EXEGESIS AND HERMENEUTICS

Exegetical Principles Deduced from Scripture Statements and Examples

From the foregoing examination of statements in the Scripture, and the many examples of conditional prophecies, it is possible to deduce a number of principles that can guide us in the exegesis of all prophetic and promissory material. Some of these may be presented as follows:

1. Whenever God speaks of blessings or punishments concerning a nation (or even an individual), that statement should be regarded as conditional. This is certainly an inspired exegetical principle, for it is exactly what Jeremiah said. As concerns individuals, the principle is illustrated too many times not to be understood to be a general one.

2. Conditional prophecies are not limited just to contemporaries or to the near future, but may extend many generations. This is illustrated clearly in the case of Eli and Solomon. The promised blessing was made to Ithamar, and was not revoked until the time of Abiathar—several generations after Eli. The promise made to Solomon was not revoked completely until twenty generations later. Another example would be that of Esau and his descendants, the Edomites. There is clear indication in the earlier parts of Scripture that God desired to bless Esau's descendants and give Mount Seir to them. However, as they moved farther and farther from God, and finally were involved in hideous atrocities against the people of Israel, God decreed their ultimate annihilation.

3. God's ultimate plans relating to His sovereignty and scheme of redemption are not conditional, but often His means to accomplish these plans are. Thus, an essential aspect of proper exegesis is to distinguish the ultimate, eternal purpose and redemptive plans of God from the instrumental plans that so often are related to the contingencies of mankind.

4. The subject matter of the prophecies, and the relationships and context in which they are stated, determine whether they are absolute or conditional. On this point, Fairbairn noted: "There is need here for a measure of discrimination, as prophecy in regard to the greater or less absoluteness of its terms must materially depend upon the kind of subjects it embraces, and the relations amid which it moves" (1874, p.

74). This is a vital point, and is the real testing ground. It would be profitable to apply this principle to Jeremiah's book of the covenant in Jeremiah 30 and 31, or Ezekiel's prophecy concerning the temple in Ezekiel 40-48.

5. Sometimes one feature of a prediction may involve a conditional statement although the prediction, as a whole, is unconditional. An excellent example of this is the prophecy concerning the throne and reign of David and his heirs. A careful study of 2 Samuel 7, 2 Kings 2, Psalm 132, a number of other Old Testament passages, and the many New Testament passages relating to the throne of David, makes it clear that this prophecy had a conditional element as it related to the earthly sons and heirs of David. It was essential that they live in accordance with God's laws in order to continue to reign upon the throne. Had they been obedient to God's law, they would have continued to reign and would not have been cut off by Babylonian captivity. On the other hand, this prophecy has a clear typological intent that is fulfilled in Christ.

6. The conditional nature of prophecy means that any given prophecy may be: (1) fulfilled exactly as stated; (2) delayed in its fulfillment; (3) altered in its fulfillment; or (4) repealed. One may point to many prophecies that are fulfilled exactly as stated, such as the prophecies concerning Josiah and Cyrus. The prophecy to Ahab was delayed in its fulfillment. The prophecies against Tyre and Babylon, as well as those concerning Israel and Judah, seem to indicate some alteration from the original. Part of this also is related to delay in fulfillment. Jonah's prophecy against Nineveh, and Micah's prophecy against Jerusalem, seem to have been repealed due to the cities' repentance.

7. In general, a prediction normally should be considered conditional (especially if it is similar to other clearly conditional prophecies) even if no expressed statement of condition is stated. It should be clear from the principles and examples mentioned earlier that the conditional element pervaded the purpose of prophecy. Jeremiah 18, Jeremiah in general, Zechariah 7, 2 Kings 17, 2 Chronicles 36, and numerous other passages prove this, and passages such as Leviticus 26 and Deuteronomy 28 demonstrate it. The many prophecies shown by subsequent events to be conditional, although no condition was stated originally, establish this. Thus, conditional prophecy is the rule rather than the exception. There is at the

present time considerable difference on this point, and some scholars would disagree with this conclusion (see McRae, 1975, 4:898). However, I believe that a careful application of the principle of conditional prophecy will convince others that this is the case.

No doubt some will disagree with these principles. However, I hope that they will serve as a point for further study and consideration. Employing these principles in the exegesis of Old Testament prophecy will lead to a greater Bible-based unity and, thus, a more persuasive example to unbelievers.

Hermeneutical Applications and Benefits Derived from the Principle of Conditional Prophecy

First, if many of the prophecies are conditional, and the conditions have not been met, this would provide a strong answer to critics and unbelievers who charge that there are many unfulfilled prophecies. In reality, any careful exegete must acknowledge that there are a number of prophecies for which exact fulfillment cannot be found. An examination of the many books on prophecy will reveal all kinds of strained interpretations to explain away the charges of the critics that these prophecies have not been fulfilled. However, if the prophecies were conditional, and if the conditions were not met, then we would expect either a repealing of the prophecy, an alteration of the fulfillment to match the alteration in the conditions, or at least some delay in the fulfillment.

Especially, the conditional element in prophecy holds vital significance for possible exegetical and hermeneutical unity in the interpretation of the prophecies about the nation of Israel and the land of Palestine. If the conditional element were accepted, this would constitute a giant step toward the unity of classical premillennialists, dispensationalists, amillennialists, and postmillennialists.

To illustrate the possibilities involved here, it might be helpful to use as a base Kuenen's classification of a large number of prophecies relating to Israel's future, which he argued to be both unfulfilled and impossible of fulfillment (1888, p. 51). His list contained:

- (1) The return of Israel out of captivity
- (2) The reunion of Ephraim and Judah
- (3) The supremacy of the house of David
- (4) The spiritual and material welfare of the restored Israel

(5) The relation between Israel and the Gentiles

(6) Israel's undisturbed continuance in the land of their habitation

As a liberal and skeptic, Kuenen (and others like him) labeled all of these as unfulfilled prophecies. On the other hand, C.A. Briggs (and others of the spiritualization approach) strained and abused Scripture and logic in a number of places to spiritualize the prophecies in each of these areas in order to find a spiritual fulfillment (1888, p. 51). Those using the futurization approach readily acknowledge that most of these have not been fulfilled, but look for them yet to be fulfilled. Again, they must stretch, strain, and often ignore the context of these prophecies to so interpret them.

However, if the conditional principle is applied, it would be evident that the Hebrew nation did not meet the conditions of righteousness and obedience to God—either during the exile or after their return from the exile. On this point, Kirkpatrick offered an important comment.

Once more, in comparing prophecy with fulfillment the conditional character of prophecy must be taken into account. How far the nation as a whole was from thorough repentance is evident from the words of the prophet himself.... It was only a fraction of the Israelites in Babylon who had faith to accept the challenge of Cyrus, and return to build the house of God. Those who did return were for the most part, as the pages of Haggai and Zechariah abundantly show, slack and selfish and slow to realise the great issues which depended on their action, and to draw upon the treasury of divine power which was open to their prayers. The pages of Nehemiah and Malachi bear witness how soon they fell into graver offences. Thus Israel's failure hindered the free action of divine grace. God could not do His work then because of their unbelief (1897, pp. 408-409).

In the time of Haggai, the people were so selfish that they were dwelling in their own sealed houses while the house of God was lying in waste. They obviously had not returned to the proper worship of God. Malachi described the priests and the people as offering polluted sacrifices at the altar and failing to give their tithes, as well as being guilty of other sins. Nehemiah and Ezra described still more sinful conditions in the land. We know from inter-testamental history how the Jews moved farther and farther away from the Law of Moses and into the traditions of the elders. The ultimate sin of the Jews was in rejecting Christ. Because of their sin, rebellion, and rejection of Christ, the apostle Paul announced the revocation of God's promises to the Jews and indicated the consequences of their not meeting the conditions. He also used this as an opportunity to warn Gentile Christians of the conditional nature in which they stood before God.

Well, by their unbelief they were broken off, and thou standest by thy faith. Be not high-minded, but fear: for if God spared not the natural branches, neither will he spare thee. Behold then the goodness and severity of God: toward them that fell, severity; but toward thee, God's goodness, if thou continue in his goodness: otherwise thou also shalt be cut off. And they also, if they continue not in their unbelief, shall be grafted in: for God is able to graft them in again. For if thou wast cut out of that which is by nature a wild olive tree and wast grafted contrary to nature into a good olive tree; how much more shall these, which are the natural branches, be grafted into their own olive tree? (Romans 11:20-24).

Jesus also announced the revocation of the promises of a glorious, restored nation and of a powerful and prosperous Jerusalem when He prophesied the destruction of Jerusalem. Whereas Jeremiah, Zechariah, Ezekiel, and others had prophesied the rebuilding of Jerusalem, Jesus, by His prophecy of the destruction of Jerusalem, naturally abrogated the former prophecies. His reason for annulling them was simply that the Jews had not met the conditions necessary to please God and to receive the blessings He intended to bestow upon them.

Of a truth, the conditional element in prophecy provides the best solution to the difficult classes of prophecies listed by Kuenen. Many of those prophecies were fulfilled in part, but because of sin in Israel, numerous others were delayed or altered. For example, the temple was rebuilt as prophesied by Ezekiel, but all that he expected and desired for it did not take place in the second temple because the priests and others offered polluted sacrifices (Malachi 1:6-14). Ezekiel himself had stated that God's glorification and honor of the temple would be dependent upon the righteous living of the people. In Ezekiel 43:9 he wrote: "Now let them put away their whoredom, and the dead bodies of their kings, far from me; and I will dwell in the midst of them forever." It is obvious that although Israel changed some of their whores after the captivity, they did not leave their whoredom. They exchanged traditionology for idolatry, but they nevertheless continued in sin. How could God keep His promises to a sinful and rebellious nation that had stoned and killed the servants of the lord of the vineyard and then finally killed His Son, the Heir.

If the conditional element truly is pervasive in the Old Testament, if it is in harmony with the nature of prophecy and the nature of God, if the conditions were not met by the Jewish nation to receive the promises of God, if the conditional element provides the best solution to the exegetical problems of Old Testament prophecy, and if it will help bring unity among all diverse elements of Christianity, why not apply it? In conclusion on this point, a statement by Fairbairn is meaningful:

Nor is this dependence of such portions of prophecy on the condition of those who are the subjects of them, a mere expedient devised to meet a difficulty in interpretation. On the contrary it rests on a principle which is essentially connected with the nature of God, and therefore cannot but pervade the revelations he gives of his mind and will in Scripture.... It was the capital error of the covenant-people that they so often forgot this. Holding their position and their prospects formally in connection with their descent from Abraham, this simply natural element was ever apt to assume too high a place in their minds, and to invest in their eyes the promises of God with an absolute and unconditional character. For them it was a most pernicious and fatal mistake in experience, as it must also be for us in interpretation, if we should tread in their footsteps. We want (lack) the key to a right understanding of all prophetic utterances of good and evil, unless we keep in view their relation to the principles of God's moral government. And we shall certainly misunderstand both him and them if we suppose that, when he most loudly threatens visitations of evil, he shall execute the threatening where repentance meanwhile has taken place, or that he can continue to bless those who may have hardened their hearts in sin, however expressly and copiously he may have promised to do them good (1874, p. 92).

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