

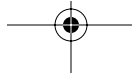


Preface

I grew up loving exploration, the kind of exploration where there were no maps and no one told you what to do or where to go. It was one step at a time into the unknown: playing with salamanders in a mud-hole, fingering fungus growing beside a tree deep in the woods, mixing chemical compounds in a high school lab, pulling an octopus from its hiding place among the rocks in the Aegean Sea, deciphering a Greek papyrus written more than two thousand years ago. Perhaps not everyone would share my enthusiasm for all of these kinds of adventure.

I am still an explorer, and this book is about biblical prophecy, an area of current exploration. Many people would have liked to tell me what to do and where to go, but I wanted to figure things out for myself—one step at a time. Perhaps not everyone will share enthusiasm for my discoveries. For some readers, joining in the exploration may be thrilling. For others it may be threatening. But I am simply asking straightforward questions about how to interpret prophecy and letting the evidence take me where it will.

But do we really need another book on prophecy? Yes and no. Books on prophecy of recent decades follow several different courses, like streams and rivulets flowing through the countryside. The biggest stream with the biggest fish purports to tell how prophecy will be fulfilled, often in relation to recent and anticipated events. For example, some prognosticated about Y2K, linking it with the fulfillment of prophecy. (For those who stockpiled supplies, the hype should have produced a few doubts about such punditry.) Another example is the fascination with the latest events in the Middle East. To some people the books detailing how—and sometimes how soon—prophecy will be fulfilled are life-giving water for the thirsty soul.





To others they are contaminated with sensationalism. Certainly if the number of books sold is the measure of success, this stream is crème de la crème.¹

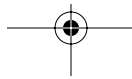
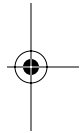
A much smaller current of books attempts to go against the flow. They challenge the assumption that contemporary events must certainly be the fulfillment of prophecy.² Typically, these books fail to attract popular audiences, partly because it is a rivulet easily overlooked. It is not known for big fish. Of course there are other types of books dealing with various aspects of prophecy and eschatology. With all these rivulets and streams of books on prophecy, it may appear that we have little need for another.

QUESTIONS TO BE EXPLORED

There are issues about this prophetic river, however, that have not received sufficient attention. How does the language of prophecy work? What can we discover from prophecies that have already been fulfilled? How were prophecies stated, and how does that compare with the fulfillment? What did the prophets intend the initial audience to understand? How do we determine when a prophet was using a figure of speech? What are people in the twenty-first century to learn from what prophets two thousand and more years ago wrote? What does God really want us to know about the future?

Our field of exploration, then, is biblical prophecy and the related apocalyptic genre. Making our way through this region may mean traveling into uncharted territory. Such is the nature of exploration. New insights usually come from going beyond where others have gone before, rather than from retracing well-worn paths of the past.³

Before embarking, you may want to ask about your guide—where is he coming from and what is his agenda? That is a valid question, especially in a field dominated by presuppositions and theological bias. So I will explain. What I offer in this book is a genuine effort to understand biblical prophecy and apocalyptic *biblically*. While it is impossible to read the text of Scripture in a neutral zone, unaffected by culture and theological and hermeneutical moorings, I have intentionally put blinders on.⁴ As much as possible my focus has been on the text and its culture rather than on the periphery of what everybody says about the text. The thesis of this book does not stand or fall based on the research of others. I am simply seeking to discover how biblical language functions, how genres differ and how





the original hearers would have understood what the prophets said.

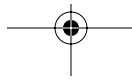
GENESIS OF RESEARCH

My interest in prophecy and apocalyptic came about as follows. During graduate school, I read the Jewish apocrypha and pseudepigrapha (the ones identified as such at that time), though not necessarily in comparison with the canonical materials.⁵ Later while teaching courses on the culture and history of the New Testament world, I began to note that the apocalyptic material in the book of Daniel uses language in distinctive ways. Two things stood out in my mind. The language in the Jewish apocalypses that I had read earlier was very similar to Daniel's, but more important, the apocalyptic language in Daniel did not seem to line up as precisely as I expected with events that have already been fulfilled. Concurrently, I began to reflect on the language of the book of Revelation. Gradually my interests turned to the hermeneutics of prophecy and apocalyptic. In other words, I did not come into this subject as a theologian seeking to defend a particular form of eschatology. I came as a philologist and historian.

A seminal thought that gave direction to some of my research was the observation (by whom I do not recall) that prophecies in the Bible were generally not understood until after they were fulfilled. I thought that assertion would be important—and relatively easy—to check out. I also had a growing sense that the language of prophecy and apocalyptic was unusual and worthy of closer inspection. My engagement with the genres of the Old Testament increased my awareness of this issue.⁶ As the research continued, I began to wonder whether a careful look at prophecy might even mean a paradigm shift in the interpretation of prophecy. Hence this book.

PREPARATORY REMARKS

Before concluding these preparations for the journey, I have a few clarifications. First, about biblical authority. Without apology, this study of prophecy and apocalyptic presumes a high view of Scripture. (As a practical example, long quotations of Scripture are set in italics, while quotations of similar length from extrabiblical sources are set in roman type.) The biblical canon is divine revelation. While I cannot prove that empirically, I make an intelligent choice to operate from that presupposition. But inspiration is a complex issue and must not be treated superficially. For ex-





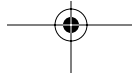
ample, the vertical dimension of Scripture must not negate the horizontal dimension: it is both divine *and* human. Even as God incarnate took up residence in human form in a specific place, time and culture, so Scripture itself is incarnational. If not beyond belief, it is at least beyond explanation. How can it be 100 percent divine and 100 percent human at the same time? How could ordinary people fashion literary masterpieces out of their own culture and creativity yet be superintended by the heavenly Spirit? For the human authors, a notion that their words had somehow been dictated from above would have been absurd. At the same time the divine imprimatur is evident from every thought to every word used to express a thought. Impossible? From a purely human perspective, yes, but by the inspiration of the divine Spirit, clearly possible.

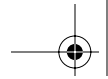
This nuanced awareness of biblical authority is important everywhere in Scripture, but especially in the prophetic portions. Evidence abounds for the human activity of the prophets. Yet even with the human element, the divine Word of the Lord is no less authoritative. *Thus saith the Lord.*

Second, about the fulfillment of prophecy. I am focusing on how to interpret, not on what to expect. Though those two questions cannot be separated completely, this book does not attempt to satisfy the common curiosity of how current events fit with biblical prophecy. It is intended, on the other hand, to satisfy a more important curiosity about how to interpret prophecy so that we can make correct decisions about what kind of events *might* fulfill biblical prophecy. The *how* question should be the starting point for everyone anyway.

Third, about limitations. This book is not intended to tell you everything you need to know about prophecy and apocalyptic. Thorough introductions to each genre provide more comprehensive treatment.⁷ This book is not intended to comment on all the prophetic portions of the canon of Scripture. Good commentaries can be found that do that. This book is not intended as a complete discussion of eschatology. Theology books take up those questions. However, the conclusions of this book may affect future introductions, commentaries and theologies.

Fourth, about dispensationalism. Though I was schooled in dispensational thought and have been associated with dispensational institutions and denominations, this book does not exist to defend premillennial dispensationalism. Some of my dispensational friends may be disappointed. Nor does it exist to dismantle dispensationalism. Some of my nondispen-





sational friends may be disappointed. My approach has been to set aside theological theories, lest the weighty jargon of the experts encumber my look at the evidence. Surely readers on both sides of the fence (unfortunate term) will recognize ways I have failed. But perhaps both groups of readers will also identify viewpoints they need to rethink.

Fifth, about indecisiveness. This book may seem to pose a lot of questions without answering them satisfactorily. Some readers will find that disheartening. But it is intentional. In my mind one of the problems in the study of prophecy (and perhaps the Bible as a whole) is a tendency to give quick answers rather than to ask reflective questions.⁸ Less pontificating and more pondering would be healthier for all of us. Frankly, only after we settle issues of hermeneutics should we begin facing the questions concerning implications for eschatology.

Sixth, about being an explorer. I am not always sure what path I am on or where I belong. While I was in seminary the trail I followed was New Testament and Greek. Then in doctoral work I turned to classical studies, with a passion for anything that would provide backgrounds to the New Testament. I stayed on the path of documentary papyri for several years.⁹ Gradually I made my way back to the discipline of New Testament studies. More recently, with my interest in New Testament apocalyptic, it became obvious that I must begin with the Old Testament prophets. Since this book interacts with the newest path in my explorations, I do not claim to be an experienced guide, only a curious explorer. The result is a simple book for simple people honestly asking simple questions about prophecy.

Seventh, about prophecy. In some discussions in this book it will be important to distinguish between prophecy and apocalyptic. In other settings—for the sake of economy of language—the term *prophecy* will be used for both prophecy and apocalyptic.

Our exploration is about ready to begin. If you choose to come along on our forays into the regions of prophecy and apocalyptic, meet down at the river. We will be following it as it meanders toward the west where the sun sets and time stands still.

